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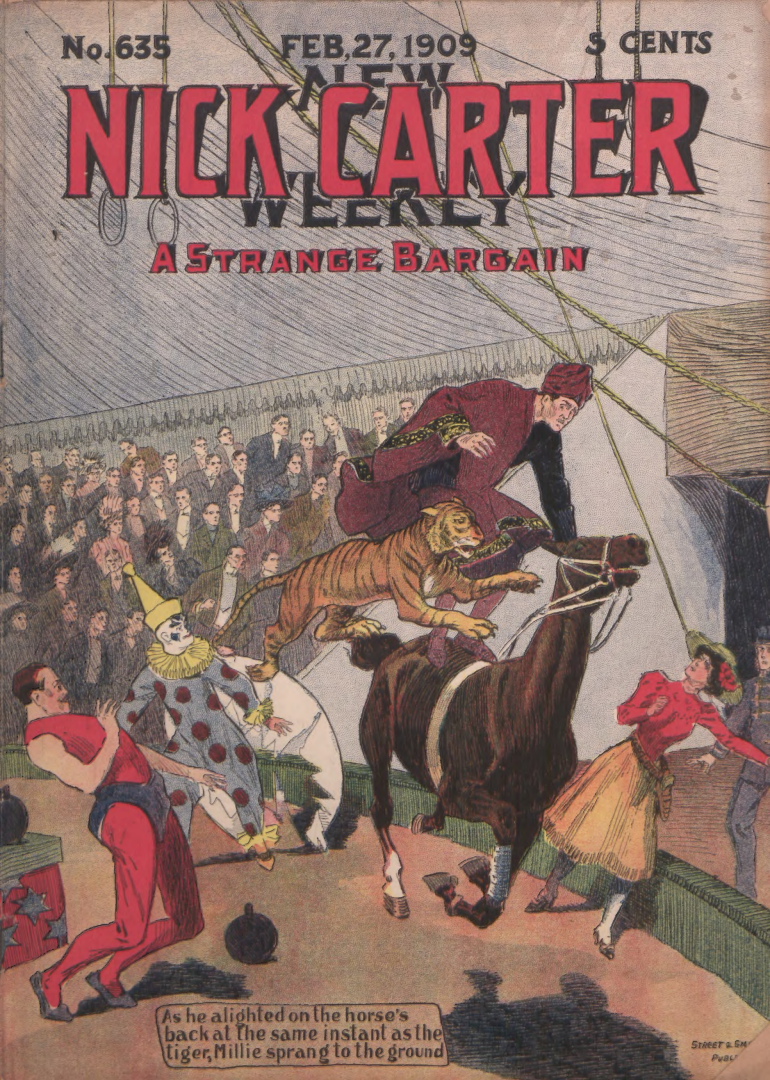
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

A STRANGE BARGAIN



As he alighted on the horse's back at the same instant as the tiger, Millie sprang to the ground

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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A STRANGE BARGAIN;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S DEAD-SHOT CIRCUS CASE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE ESCAPE OF THE TIGER.

A royal Bengal tiger, at large in the streets of a great city, is not a pleasant condition to contemplate, nor is it calculated to induce complacency in the mind of a man who regards himself as responsible for it.

Nick Carter confessed himself to be more startled, when he was told about it, than he would have cared to admit at the moment.

Prince, his pet tiger, given to him by James Dumont, the tiger-tamer, had escaped and was at large; at least, so Joseph informed the detective when he entered the house; and Joseph looked sufficiently disturbed while he was conveying the information.

It was the night which followed the day of the arrest of Millie Slade, "The World-renowned Equestrienne, and Creation's Most Wonderful Pistol-shot," as she was billed throughout the city; and, indeed, she had made all promises good in her performances. "Hindpaugh's Homogeneous Host of Spectacular Specialist Performers" regarded her as the greatest attraction on the program.

She rode half a dozen different Arabian horses during her act; each one was innocent of all accouterment; not a strap showed upon any one of them; and from the bare backs of these madly-rushing horses she performed with her pistols the most wonderful feats of skill that were ever heard or dreamed of.

But, alas! Millie proved her marksmanship once too often; and she performed the act in a manner which turned the consequences back upon herself, like the boomerangs of Australian natives. She had made use of her skill to murder James Dumont, the tiger-tamer, while he was taking his Sunday afternoon nap on the couch in the studio apartment he had occupied only a few days; and Millie had accomplished the deed by making use of one of her favorite spectacular performances.*

Would you believe that a marksman could put a bullet into the bull's-eye of a target that was placed at right-angles from the direction in which he aimed the pistol? Millie did it over and over again; she never missed it, in fact. Could you guess how it was done? I doubt it. The wonderful feat was accomplished with the aid of a steel plate, bent at right-angles and fastened with screws against the spot at which she aimed the muzzle of her weapon; and the steel plate was so made that when the bullet struck

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY No. 634.

it was deflected; it flew off at right-angles and struck the bull's-eye which Millie could not even see when she fired the shot.

It has been said that a bullet cannot be fired around a corner; but Millie Slade did it.

How long and carefully, and how assiduously she had toiled and practised in order to accomplish the feat, need not appear here; but after she had become proficient in the act she always said that it was really the simplest thing she did in the show.

Of course, it was important that the bent steel plate should be mathematically exact; that it should be placed with exactitude; that the target containing the bull's-eye to be hit must also be correctly placed—and Millie always attended to those arrangements in person.

But after everything was in place, Millie only had to fire her bullet against the steel plate, striking it at a certain point, to have the bullet deflected so it would find its target exactly.

You or I perhaps might have found it difficult to hit the bent plate of steel with perfect exactness, but it was a simple matter for Millie to do so, since she was unquestionably the greatest pistol-shot since Ira Paine.

Well, that was how she killed James Dumont. She knew his habits; she knew that he always slept Sunday afternoons; she made her way to his rooms in his absence, took measurements, fastened the steel plate to the window-frame just outside the open upper half of one of the windows—and then, when Sunday afternoon came she walked past the house, and from the street fired her bullet against the bent plate. The bullet was deflected to the couch, and it killed the man who was sleeping there.

Dumont, the murdered man, had been a tiger-tamer for the "Homogeneous Host of Spectacular Specialists" emblazoned on the bill-boards by "Hindpaugh's Aggregation of World-renowned Performers." Among his tigers was one called Prince, Dumont's own personal property and his particular pet. Prince had taken a great fancy to Nick Carter; had, in fact, become his property after the death of Dumont, according to the wishes of the latter; and it should be said right here that the presence of the tiger in the room at the time of the killing of Dumont—the fact of its presence there—had materially aided the detective in clearing up the mysteries involved in the crime.*

*A complete history of the incidents which led up to this story will be found in No. 634 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "The Tiger Tamer."

Without going deeper into the preceding incidents, it is sufficient to state that this explains why the tiger was at Nick Carter's house at all; also how it happened to be there in order to make its escape and consequently to terrify Joseph and to startle the detective, when he arrived at his home, almost two hours after midnight, following upon the arrest of Millie Slade.

The tiger had been at Nick Carter's house two days. Dumont was killed Sunday afternoon; the arrest of Millie Slade followed on Tuesday morning, shortly after ten o'clock; it had occurred in the room where Dumont was killed, whither the detective had induced Millie to accompany him; she had confessed her crime and was given over to the charge of a lieutenant of police, who was present at the time—and Nick Carter had hurried away to catch a train for Philadelphia, where he had an important engagement. He had left Philadelphia for New York again, at ten that night; had arrived shortly after twelve; had stopped at a restaurant on his way home, and all this with the result that when he did reach his own home, the time was shortly before two in the morning.

The tiger had been left in the meantime in charge of Joseph, to whom the beast had seemed also to take a particular fancy—and it had been Nick Carter's intention to bestow the beautiful animal upon the zoological department of the Bronx Park, the following day. In the meantime, it had been given a room at the top of the detective's house, where Joseph fed it and watered it and cared for it during the few hours in which Nick Carter was compelled to be absent.

But now, when the detective ran up the steps of his own house and was met by Joseph, who opened the door for him, it may be realized how startled he really was to hear his servant exclaim:

"Oh, Mr. Carter! I am so glad you have come! The tiger has escaped!"

Nick stopped stock-still in the act of crossing the threshold.

"What?" he said sharply.

Joseph repeated the information tremblingly, for he was seriously frightened. His face was pale and drawn; his eyes were furtive, as if he expected the tiger to leap out upon him at any instant from some dark corner. The horror of the situation had gotten upon Joseph's nerves, notwithstanding the fact that personally he had not been in the least afraid of the animal.

But a huge tiger, at large in the streets of New York at the dead of night, was quite another thing

than having a pet tiger in a room where it was docile and kind; where it understood and obeyed each command that was given it; where it purred and seemed content if it were not left too long a time alone.

For Prince was a companionable beast; he did not like solitude; he objected to being alone. Raised from a cub in the personal care of its former master, treated from its birth as if he were a pet dog, he had been accustomed to being talked to and caressed. One of the admonitions of Dumont to the detective when they had talked together about the tiger, had been:

"When Prince becomes your property never leave him too long a time alone. He becomes restless and nervous without human companionship, Mr. Carter. That is one of the reasons why I want you to have him after I am gone. I don't know what he would do, if he were neglected, but I fear he would turn as savage as he is now docile."

Nick recalled that admonition while he faced Joseph in the doorway. But it was not a time for recriminations.

It did not even matter, just then, *how* the tiger had escaped, or why. The important fact seemed to be that Prince was at that moment at liberty, in the city of New York, and that the dreadful possibilities of such a thing could not be conjectured.

Even if Prince possessed the best intentions in the world when he wandered forth, he was still a tiger, and he would produce a panic wherever he appeared; even if he looked upon all persons he met with the same docility he displayed with Nick Carter and Joseph, he would none the less fill them with terror; even if he could be safely approached at any moment, and would permit himself to be led back again into captivity, there would be no person who would dare to so approach him.

And then there were the other possibilities.

People would fly from him; horses would be frightened and run away; policemen might shoot at him.

A tiger's temper, even among the best of them, is a thing not safely to be relied upon under trying circumstances.

The condition which Nick Carter found himself facing as he stood there in his own doorway, was appalling.

The first and most necessary question under the circumstances, Nick Carter shot out at Joseph, instantly:

"How long ago?" he demanded. "When did he escape?"

"I don't really know, sir," was the trembling reply.

"When did you discover that he was gone?"

"Less than half an hour ago."

"Less than half an hour ago! Great Scott, Joseph, have you been waiting here for my return all that time, when——"

"No, sir; no! I have been looking for him! I have, indeed! I have run up and down the avenue and around the block. I only just came back into the house—just now, sir!"

"When was the very latest that you know the tiger had not escaped?"

"I went to the room to carry some fresh water to him, at——"

"Well? Why do you hesitate? What time was that, if it is the last time you saw him?"

"I am trying to be exact, sir. It was shortly after eight."

"Shortly after eight! Six hours ago! And I ordered you not to leave Prince alone more than half an hour at a time, till my return! Is that the way you obey my orders?"

"Oh, sir—I——"

"Silence!"

The detective turned on his heel and ran down the steps again, into the street.

He felt that he had wasted too much time already; that he ought not to have hesitated a second after he was told of the tiger's escape. Somewhere in the city the tiger was roaming at large, and the one dominant fact was that he must be found without delay.

CHAPTER II.

AN AMAZING TABLEAU.

Where to search for the tiger!

That was the dominant, overwhelming, awe-inspiring question; the unanswerable one.

"Six hours!" the detective muttered to himself, as he paused for an instant upon the corner next above his own house. "Five hours at the least. Five hours of liberty in the street! Five hours of wandering unleashed! Good Heavens, Prince ought certainly to have left a trail behind him that should not be difficult to follow."

It would seem so, indeed.

"Even if he has injured nobody," the detective continued, "he should have frightened hundreds. Dozens of policemen should have reported him to their station-houses before this time."

Nick discovered a policeman approaching him,

down the avenue, and he hurried to meet the officer—and he was one who was well known to the detective.

"Cal," he exclaimed, as soon as he was near enough to speak, "have you seen or heard anything about a tiger that is at large somewhere, in the streets?"

To the utter amazement of the detective, the officer burst into a laugh; and he laughed on, immoderately for a time until Nick stopped him with an impatient exclamation.

"Answer my question!" he said sharply, "and don't stand there, laughing like a fool!"

The officer controlled himself instantly, and he replied:

"I am sure I beg your pardon, Mr. Carter, but I had not the least idea that your question was a serious one. I thought you meant Charlie Murphy, and you know that McCarren has——"

"Enough of that. Answer me."

"I am trying to do so, sir. You see, Moriarity was on this beat early in the night, and he reported that he had seen a tiger on the street. Of course, nobody believed him, but, all the same, he stuck to it. The lieutenant swore that Moriarity had been drinking, and he laid him off, and everybody has been laughing about it ever since. Moriarity is——"

"Where did Moriarity say that he saw the tiger?" the detective interrupted.

"Why, right along here somewhere."

"What time?"

"About eight-thirty or a quarter to nine, I suppose it was."

"Which way was the tiger going? What did Moriarity say about it?"

"I don't rightly know, sir; nobody believed him, and——"

"More fools, they!"

"Sir, you don't mean to say——"

"That a tiger was at large? Certainly. Moriarity was right and your lieutenant is an ass. You can tell him so for me when you return to the station-house. Where is your nearest telephone-box?"

"At the next corner, sir."

"Take me there at once, and open it for me. Then report to the station-house that a tiger *is* at large on the streets. Say that you have it from me. Tell them to ask headquarters about it. Say that I want all the information there is, and that I want it quick!"

They were not long in arriving at the telephone-box after that, for the officer saw by the manner of the detective that this was no joking matter.

Nevertheless, the information they obtained was very meager. All that could be gleaned was to the effect that two officers had reported seeing a tiger on the streets that night—one of them at about eight-thirty—doubtless Moriarity—the other an hour later. Both reports had been regarded as jokes, and no attention had been paid to them.

The detective was nonplussed.

He did not know what to make of the circumstance. The idea that a huge Bengal tiger could roam at will about the streets of the city at that early hour of the night and bring only two reports of being seen was of itself preposterous.

The only manner in which Nick could account for it was that the tiger had gone inside of some place and had perhaps been shut in; but, even so, some notice must have been taken of the beast.

The detective took the telephone himself, and had the wire connected with the central office; and then he reported just what had actually occurred, begging that a general alarm be sent out, and he added:

"I will call you again from another box, a little later. In the meantime, I hope you will have some information to give me. I must get track of the tiger somehow, for there is no telling the harm he may do if some one angers him. He is as docile as a dog with me; but others don't know that fact."

He left the policeman then and hurried onward, looking up and down each street as he passed it, but nowhere did he see or hear any sign of the wandering Prince.

At the end of half an hour he called up headquarters again, but nothing had been heard.

It was a marvelous circumstance that not a thing had been seen or heard of the tiger, save those two reports already mentioned, and Nick Carter was astounded.

In his eager search he doubled on his tracks many times, going this way and that, but keeping all the time in the same neighborhood; but without results.

"Can it be possible," he asked himself, "that Prince has made for the open country, and that he has slunk along, keeping out of sight, so that no one has seen him save those two officers?"

It would seem so, and yet as the detective thought it over, it did not seem possible.

He had paused to ask himself these questions, and now he noticed that he was standing on the corner of Twenty-eighth Street and the avenue. He was only a comparatively short distance from the studio apartment where Jim Dumont, the tiger-tamer, was killed; where the tiger had lived for a short time with his

former master; where the tiger had actually been in the room with Dumont when he was shot; where the animal had mourned alone beside the body of his dead master during many hours until Nick Carter had arrived on the scene and entered the room.*

It occurred to the detective at that moment that the tiger, following the instinct of its kind, might, upon finding itself at liberty, have sought its former home; have sought the spot where it had lived with Dumont.

It was only a huge cat, after all; and cats proverbially will return to a place of former residence, if an opportunity offers.

It was a slender chance to follow, and yet the detective acted upon it at once.

He hurried through the street toward the house in question, wondering if he would find the huge beast camped upon the front steps when he should arrive.

The time was now half-past two in the morning; the streets were deserted; as he approached the house he saw not a soul in any direction; and at last he reached the front steps of the house he sought, and ran up them quickly.

For a glance had told him that the front door of the place was open—that is, that it was swinging half-ajar. It gave entrance upon a hallway, from whence stairs led to the upper floors. The apartment, consisting of two rooms and a bath, which Dumont had occupied with the tiger, was at the top of the house, in the mansard roof.

A dim light burned in the hall. Nick was rather amazed to find the door ajar. He knew it was not the habit of the janitor of the place to leave it so—but it was always possible that one of the tenants, entering late, had not securely latched the door after him.

Nick Carter had possessed himself of a key to the apartment, when he had had occasion to visit it before, and he still retained it. Now, as he ascended the stairs he sought for and found it.

Even while he ascended the stairs he felt that it was a silly notion for him to believe that he would find the tiger there; but he was impelled to go on, even against his better judgment.

He reached the landing at the head of the last flight of stairs, and stopped. The door which opened upon the rear room of the two contained in the apartment was not closed; it was almost shut, however, but not quite. A thin streak of light, not wider than an eighth of an inch, extended from top to bottom of the doorway, showing that the door was not latched.

*See Nick Carter Weekly No. 634.

The detective stopped a moment to listen; but he heard no sound whatever, although it was altogether astounding that any person should be in that apartment at that hour.

Dumont's effects had not been removed; to arrange for that duty had been a part of Nick Carter's program for the day following. But who had dared to visit that apartment in the middle of the night, without permission, to search through the effects of James Dumont?

Men think rapidly under circumstances such as Nick Carter found himself surrounded by at that moment. As he went over the former case, which had ended in the murder of Dumont and the arrest of the woman who had killed him, he decided that only one person in all the world would have an interest in searching that room, among Dumont's effects, and that one person would be Millie Slade herself—unless, indeed, she had succeeded in persuading the manager of "Hindpaugh's Aggregation of World-renowned Wonders" to do so for her; for Millie was in jail, or, at least, she was supposed to be.

But she had been in love with the manager—Christopher Powers by name. Behind that fact rested the real motive for the crime she had committed, for James Dumont was her husband, although they had been estranged for years.

All these thoughts flew through the brain of the detective during the moment when he hesitated at the head of the stairs; then he stepped forward quickly toward the door, and pushed it wide open.

As has been said, it was the door that gave upon the rear room of the two that formed the apartment, which fact accounted for Nick's not having seen the reflection of the light from the sidewalk of the street.

Nevertheless, the electric lights had been snapped on, and were burning brightly, illuminating the room brilliantly.

And what a sight it was that met the gaze of the detective, as he stood there in the open doorway, gazing into that apartment which had been the sleeping-room of the tiger-tamer.

The room itself was a large one. In the very center of it the tiger was crouched, so that he faced the open door wherein Nick Carter was standing—and the animal raised its head as the detective appeared on the threshold.

It is almost impossible to describe the scene adequately.

Millie Slade, the wonderful equestrienne performer and dead-shot of the circus, was there also. She was

lying at full length on the floor, with her arms outstretched at right-angles with her body, and one of the huge paws of the tiger was resting upon her, as if to hold her down in the position she had assumed.

Nick could not tell whether the woman was dead or not; he only knew that she was perfectly motionless, and was therefore at least unconscious; but there was not a mark on her that Nick could see.

But the scene already described was not the only astonishing sight thus revealed to the detective, for huddled in a far corner of the room, where Nick had not seen it at first, was the body of a man—a man with his face turned toward the detective; and in that face Nick recognized instantly the features of Christopher Powers, the manager of the circus.

It was a tableau well worth remembering, for during the first moment or two after the detective appeared there was nowhere a motion of any kind, save only the slow blinking of the eyes of the tiger, as the animal regarded the detective in the doorway, calmly, and without the least sign of anger.

"Prince," said the detective, then, and in a low tone. "Prince?"

But the tiger did not offer to move. It only blinked an acknowledgment of Nick Carter's presence.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT KILLED THE MAN?

It is not the most enviable situation imaginable to be alone at half-past two o'clock in the morning, in a room with a Bengal tiger, where there are already two apparently dead bodies present; for Nick had no doubt at the moment that at least the man over in the corner was dead, and Millie certainly appeared as if she might be so.

The indications were, as must be admitted, that the tiger had killed both those people, and was only resting from the attack at the moment when Nick Carter entered the room—and if the animal had done that, there could be no doubt that the blood-lust of the creature had been aroused; that its savage instincts were predominant, and therefore even Nick Carter, the tiger's friend, could not be safe in that room.

But to do the detective justice, he did not think of his own danger at the moment; he thought only of the horror of the situation, and he blamed himself that it could have been made possible at all.

It did not occur to him to doubt his influence over the tiger, which had heretofore given every evidence of fondness for him; of a sort of fondness that can only be found in a faithful dog which loves its master, no matter how savage it may be toward others.

All this time the tiger remained beside the insensible form of Millie Slade. It did not offer to move. A significant and also a reassuring fact was that even its tail was still—for a cat's tail is the barometer of its temper. In the canine family a movement of the tail indicates joy and pleasure; in the feline family it indicates the opposite.

Prince merely blinked his eyes toward the detective; otherwise the animal remained motionless, with its huge right paw resting upon the body of the woman, whose eyes were closed.

How long the detective remained staring at the scene from that open doorway, he could not have told, but during the time he took in every detail of the place with that thoroughness which was always characteristic of his habits.

He saw, for example, that the drawers of the bureau and of a chiffonier had been pulled open and ransacked; he saw that the top of the trunk had been lifted, the trays removed, and that the contents of both were scattered about the floor near it; he saw that a general search of the place had evidently been going on at the time the tiger had appeared and interrupted it.

He saw the huddled heap of Powers' body over in the corner, betraying, so far as the detective could observe at that moment, no more appearance of violence than did the form of Millie Slade—and yet the detective was quite certain in that instant that Powers was dead, even though he supposed that Millie Slade was not.

But the eyes of Powers were open and staring, glassy in their lack of expression; and the body where it was huddled in the corner was limp.

Nick could not see into the front room of the apartment, to observe what had been going on in there, but he had no doubt that the same sort of search which was evidenced here had also been conducted there.

The questions arose in his mind: What sort of search was it? Who had made it? How had Millie Slade escaped from her prison-cell to be in that apartment when the tiger arrived there after its escape? Had she gone there with Christopher Powers, or had they met quite by accident? Was it a prearranged thing between them which the tiger had interrupted, or was the entire encounter the result of accident?

Naturally, there was no answer to any of these questions; at least, not at the moment.

The circumstance by which the detective was confronted was the all-absorbing one for the time being. There was the tiger crouching upon the floor beside the senseless form of the woman; there was the huddled heap of the man in the corner; there was the uncertainty of the possible attitude of the animal in the face of interruption.

Looking into the eyes of the tiger, as he stood there, the detective saw no indication of fierceness or of temper; nothing to suggest that the blood-lust of the animal had been aroused.

The expression of its eyes was outwardly the same as always when Prince had looked upon the detective, and reassured by this fact, Nick stepped farther into the room and partly closed the door behind him.

It was a critical moment, for he could have no idea how the creature would act, and yet he felt certain of his own influence over it.

He recalled in that instant that the tiger was always amenable to human influence when addressed in the Hindustanee language, and whatever else he said to it after that, save only the creature's name, was to be pronounced in that tongue.

"Prince," he said, taking a step nearer. "Prince, old fellow, what is it? Come here to me," and he reached out his hand toward the beast, which emitted now a low purr of satisfaction.

It seemed to the detective in that moment as if the animal were really glad of his presence there.

"Prince," he said, again, and this time quite sharply, and then in the Hindustanee tongue he ordered it to rise and come to him.

Slowly, and with some appearance of reluctance, the animal began to move. At first it took its paw away from the body of Millie Slade, then with great deliberation it contracted first one muscle, then another, until it rose slowly to its feet and stood there, peering and blinking across the body of Millie Slade toward the man whom it now recognized as its master.

"Come here!" the detective ordered it again; and then Prince moved forward, with the slow, sinuous grace that was natural, and in another moment was rubbing its jowls against the detective like the great cat it was.

Nick bent forward and patted its head; then downward and began whispering in its ears the endearing terms in Hindustanee, which Jim Dumont had taught him to use in pacifying it.

His whole idea now was to make the animal forget the appearance of things in that room, and to keep its eyes fixed upon his own until he could lead it out of the apartment and away from the scene by which it was now surrounded.

He got down on his knees beside it presently, and put his arm around the huge creature's neck, caressing it and whispering to it as Dumont had taught him to do; and then, after a little, when the creature was purring quite loudly Nick assumed an upright attitude again, and with a gentle pressure not too insistent, directed Prince toward the door, and so at last enticed him out upon the hallway and down the stairs toward the street.

Nick Carter confessed afterward, in discussing this occasion with his assistants, that he had never passed through a more thrilling time in his life than was occupied by the next twenty minutes during which he led the tiger into the street and through it to the avenue, and thence to the door of his own house, where he rang the bell for Joseph.

We need not dwell upon the fact that Nick Carter restored the animal to the room in his house, where it had been formerly confined, and that, having left instructions with Joseph for its care and to see that it did not escape again, he hurried back to the studio apartment in Twenty-eighth Street, where so much remained to be done.

This time Patsy and Chick accompanied him, for he had sent Joseph to arouse them both; when he was at home and on the way he explained to them all that had occurred at the Twenty-eighth Street house.

The appearance of things there were exactly as he left them when he took the tiger away. Millie Slade was still lying upon her back on the floor, where the tiger had crouched beside her, and Christopher Powers, or all that remained of him, was huddled over in the corner where Nick had first discovered him.

There had been no possibility of the detective's paying any attention to either of them at the time he took the tiger away, for everything else had to be subservient to that one necessity.

Now, directing Chick to look after Powers, Nick, with Patsy's assistance, raised the form of Millie Slade from the floor, and bore it into the front room, to the very couch upon which Jim Dumont had been lying when he was slain.

The detective knew the moment he touched the body of the woman that she was not dead; that she was not even injured, at least so far as he could determine, and he decided that she had merely fainted from terror when the tiger had appeared upon the scene to interrupt her.

As he and Patsy stood over her, wondering what it would be best to do, Chick came to them fronf the rear room and announced, with some abruptness:

"Powers is quite dead, although I don't think that the tiger had anything to do with it."

"Why?" said Nick, wheeling upon him.

"Because I can see no evidence of anything of the kind. There isn't a mark of a tooth or a claw upon his body; his neck is broken."

"What?" exclaimed the detective.

"The man's neck is broken; that is what killed him."

"Then it was broken by a blow from Prince's paw," said the detective, with conviction; but Chick shook his head, and replied slowly:

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because if it were so—if it were true that Powers' neck was broken by a blow from the tiger's paw, some evidence of the force of that blow would remain upon the dead man's features. There is no such evidence. There is not a bruise of any kind upon him that I can find. There is not a scratch of a claw, as would be apt to be the case had Prince struck him with his padded foot. There is not a mark of a tooth, and, in fact, there is no indication that I can discover that the tiger has been near enough to the man to touch him."

Nick and Patsy listened to Chick's statement in utter silence, and then all three looked from one to another in amazed perplexity at the mysterious circumstance.

Then, while they were still undecided what to say or do, and before any of them could make any further remark, Millie Slade uttered a deep sigh and opened her eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STUDIO APARTMENT MYSTERY.

It would not be correct to say unreservedly that Millie Slade opened her eyes to consciousness, for, although she could see the three men who were grouped about her, there was no recognition in the glances she bestowed upon them.

She looked from one face to another, deliberately and apparently with very little interest; then she smiled and murmured something which none of them could understand.

"Millie," said Nick sharply, "pull yourself together. I want to talk to you."

Again she opened her eyes and looked into the detective's face, smiling, and she replied:

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"No foolishness, Millie," said the detective sharply. "Don't pretend that you do not know me, for you do. How did you get here to these rooms? Who brought you here? How did you escape from the Tombs?"

She did not reply; she did not make any effort to do so; she only stared almost unwinkingly at the detective, while the smile gradually left her lips and eyes, giving place to an expression of affright, which was followed by a shudder, as she exclaimed, in a husky whisper:

"Where is it? Where is the tiger?"

"Gone," said Nick. "I took it away."

"I don't believe you," she retorted. "It is here now. It is waiting there behind you to attack me."

"No," said Nick, "the tiger is not here. I took it away, I tell you," and he stepped aside, hoping that she would discover with the evidence of her own eyesight that he had spoken the truth.

Suddenly finding herself at liberty, she uttered a loud scream, and at the same instant leaped from her recumbent position upon the couch, shrieking and crying out words of affright as she did so, and clawing at the air with her hands, so that Nick Carter, fearful lest she would do herself an injury of some sort, sprang forward and seized her to restrain her. He saw in that moment that she was quite beside herself as a result of the experiences she had passed through, and that the terror of her encounter with the tiger, whatever the nature of that encounter might have been, had unbalanced her mind for the time being, so that she was totally incapable of explaining any of the things he wished to know.

For a time she continued to struggle with almost maniacal strength, and then gradually her efforts subsided and she sank back upon the couch again, exhausted.

By a gesture Nick indicated that the others leave him alone with her, and Chick and Patsy passed into the rear of the apartment, closing the door after them.

For a moment after they had gone the detective stood, looking down upon the face of Millie Slade, and then he drew a chair beside the couch and seated himself upon it, taking one of her hands and holding it between both his own.

"Millie," he said, rendering his voice as tender as possible, "try to think a moment. Don't you know who I am?"

She nodded, but she did not reply.

"Who am I?" he asked. "Tell me that."

Without an instant's hesitation, she responded:

"You are Jim Dumont. I know you. Don't think for a moment that you can fool me. Am I not your wife? And haven't I wished for, oh, so long a time, that you were dead? Some day I will kill you, Jim. Some day I will turn those pistols of mine upon you —those pistols that I know so well how to use. I will take the bent steel plate which I use for the right-angle target, and I will fix it somewhere so that I can shoot you down when you don't know I'm looking at you. Oh, I have thought of it for a long time, Jim Dumont. I have thought about it so long that I dream it at night."

Nick Carter did not interrupt the woman; he preferred to let her go on in this manner until she had talked herself out, realizing that it was the best way if he wished to bring her back to her senses, so that she could explain to him the things so necessary for him to know.

He thought it best to humor her for the time being in her idea that he was James Dumont, the tiger-tamer, her erstwhile husband; and so he asked:

"Why did you come here to see me, Millie?"

"Because I wanted my letters and pictures," she replied unhesitatingly. "I did not want them to remain in your possession. You know when you are dead I may decide to marry Christopher Powers, and if I should do that I don't want him ever to know that I was once your wife."

"Did Christopher Powers came here with you, Millie?"

"No."

"Did you find him here when you arrived?"

An expression of perplexity appeared in her eyes, and for a time she seemed puzzled what answer to make to this question; but at last she nodded, and said:

"Yes; I found Jim here. He was searching the place. He had your trunk open and—now I remember—he had found the letters and the pictures and the other things that I wanted."

"What happened then, Millie?"

"Oh, I don't know," she exclaimed petulantly turning her head from side to side with impatience; then suddenly she stared again, the expression of terror reappearing in her eyes, and she looked about her in affright, as if to search for the tiger.

"Then Prince came," she exclaimed, in a shrill whisper. "He pushed open the door and walked into [illegible] just as if he were human. I don't know how he got here or where he came from. Perhaps I left the door open; I do not know. I saw Prince and I screamed. I tried to run past him toward the door, but he got in my way, and he wouldn't let me by. Whichever way I turned he stood in front of me, and then—oh, I don't know what then. I think the lights went out. Everything was dark, and when it was light again you were here and those men with you. Who are they, Jim, and where have they gone?"

"Wait, Millie, wait a moment," said Nick, in a kindly tone. "Let us finish what we were talking about first."

Again she seemed to forget her terror for the tiger for the moment, and Nick asked her gently:

"Where was Powers all this time?"

"All of what time?"

"Where was Powers when Prince came into the room?"

She shuddered at this question, and closed her eyes; but presently she murmured:

"I don't know."

"Wasn't he there with you?"

She nodded.

"What did he do when the tiger came into the room?"

"I don't know."

"Did he see Prince first, or did you?"

"I don't remember."

"How long had you been with Powers before the tiger came?"

"Oh, a long time, Jim; a very long time; hours and hours."

"Had you and Christopher Powers quarreled? Were you quarreling when the tiger came?"

She laughed at this question, and it was not a pleasant laugh to hear.

"Why do you ask so many strange questions?" she exclaimed petulantly. "What difference does it make to you whether Christopher Powers and I quarreled or not?"

Nick began to realize the utter impossibility of obtaining any satisfactory information from Millie Slade in her present state of mind.

He was not sure, however, that she was not pretending a great part of the condition in which she appeared to be.

He knew that she was quite capable of doing so if she had had the forethought to attempt it.

But in either case it would not be possible to obtain from her the information he sought, for if her condi-

tion were pretense she certainly would not give it, and if it were real she could not.

However, he tried another line of questioning, and he asked her quite abruptly and with some sharpness in his tone:

"How did you escape from prison, Millie?"

Slowly she turned her eyes upon him, as if she had not in the least comprehended the question, and then after a moment she asked:

"What prison do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"You were in a prison-cell, weren't you?"

"A prison-cell? No, never."

"Millie," he demanded suddenly, "don't you know that I am not James Dumont?"

She did not answer. She only continued to stare at him.

"Don't you know that James Dumont is dead, and that you killed him?"

She continued to stare without replying.

"Don't you remember that it isn't many hours ago when you were placed under arrest, taken to a police station-house and thence committed to the Tombs for shooting your husband, James Dumont?"

For a long time after that question she did not move her eyes from the detective's face, but continued to stare in the same expressionless manner, as if she did not in the least understand what had been asked of her; but presently, and with a suddenness which the detective had not at all expected, she sprang from the couch, pushing against the detective, who was seated beside her, as she did so, and so entirely unforeseen was her act that the chair was overturned and Nick Carter was precipitated with it to the floor before he had time to resist her attack.

And with the same frenzied effort that had taken her from the couch to her feet, she leaped over him and away from him, reached the door, tore it open, slammed it shut behind her, and was running down the stairs by the time the detective could recover himself sufficiently to pursue her.

CHAPTER V.

ACQUITTING THE TIGER OF THE CRIME.

There are none of us so expert that accidents will not happen to us at times, and it was an entirely unexpected accident, and one which could not have been helped that militated against the immediate success of Nick Carter in his pursuit of Millie Slade at that moment.

He darted after her, of course, the moment he could regain his feet; but she had been wonderfully quick in her motions, and had passed through the door and closed it after her before he really realized what had happened.

When he did leap into the hallway in pursuit of her she was already at the bottom of the first flight of stairs she had to descend—and in her flight she had evidently kicked against a doormat that was lying in front of the door through which she had made her escape, and in doing so had propelled it across the hall to the top of the stairs.

At all events, it was lying there, half-over the edge of the top stair, and the result was that when Nick Carter stepped upon it, it slid from beneath him, tripping him effectually, so that he pitched, feet first, down the stairs.

The wonder was that he did not receive an injury by reason of the fall, but even then he was delayed, for seconds count as much on such an occasion; and by the time he was again upon his feet and had taken up the pursuit a second time, Millie had gained considerably, and was already running down the steps into the street.

There fortune favored her, for a belated taxicab was passing at the moment, returning from an engagement; it was therefore unoccupied.

All that Nick Carter knew about the circumstance at the time was that when he rushed out upon the street it was just in time to see the taxicab dashing away at full speed, and to understand that Millie had managed to gain the inside of it and to induce the driver to carry her away somewhere.

He ran after it, shouting; but if the chauffeur heard him, he paid no heed; and in another moment the vehicle had passed from sight around the next corner.

But Nick ran onward, hoping that he would find another cab in which he might keep up the pursuit; but no such opportunity offered, and after seeing the cab turn a second corner, he was forced to abandon the chase for the time, and to return slowly to the house he had just left, and from which Millie had succeeded in escaping him so dexterously.

He encountered Chick and Patsy at the top of the last flight of stairs, and related what had happened; then he followed them into the rear room, saying as he did so:

"There is no use in trying to follow Millie now, [illegible] you, Patsy, had better go at once to the [illegible]

headquarters of the red taxicabs. It isn't likely to be very long before the fellow who picked Millie up returns there. You can make him take you to the place where he left her, and from there you should have no difficulty in tracing her. Chick and I will remain here."

As soon as Patsy had taken his departure Nick gave his attention to an examination of the body of Christopher Powers, and the more he extended his labors the more puzzled he became over the circumstance.

As Chick had said, there was absolutely no mark of any kind upon the head or body of the dead man to indicate what had happened to him.

The man's neck was broken; there was no gainsaying that fact; but in what manner it had been broken, or by what agency, was a mystery for which there was no apparent solution.

Nick Carter knew perfectly well—indeed, anybody would have known as much—that if the man's neck had been fractured by a blow from the paw of the tiger, some evidence of the force of it would have remained to indicate the fact; there was no such evidence.

A tiger can strike a terrific blow with one of its padded paws; no other animal, unless it is a Nubian lion or a grizzly bear, can strike with such force; and the padded feet of all such beasts are rough and coarse and can inflict a bruise which will at once become pronounced; also when such a blow is struck, one or more of the claws of the animal are always in evidence.

But the man's neck was broken, and it was that fact that had caused his death. There was not the least doubt of either of these premises.

"The tiger did not kill him," said Nick, turning to face Chick, after completing his examination.

"No," replied the assistant; "but what did kill him? A man's neck isn't broken in that manner without a cause behind it. What did it?"

Instead of replying to the apparently unanswerable question, the detective began a search of the room with his eyes.

Something has already been said of the condition in which it was found; how the drawers of the bureau and the chiffonier had been ransacked; how the contents of the trunk had been scattered about the floor around it; and now the detective looked among this litter of articles, searching for something with which the act of murder might have been committed.

Presently he stepped across to the open trunk and looked down inside it; then he bent forward and raised something from the interior, which he lifted and held before Chick's eyes.

It was a long, slender bag, made of turkey red, not larger in circumference than a man's wrist and about a yard in length; but it was heavy and it bent readily in one's grasp, for it was filled with sand—sea-sand, doubtless.

"Do you know what that is, Chick?" the detective asked his assistant.

Chick took the article in his hand, examined it, and returned it.

"I know *what* it is," he replied. "It is a funny-looking bag, filled with sand; but what it is for, or why it was ever made in that shape and size, I cannot imagine. Perhaps you will enlighten me."

"It is what is called a window-bag," replied the detective. "Ethel made a lot of them once when we were first married. The house we lived in at the time was draughty. The wind insisted upon driving in around the windows. I brought a lot of sea-sand home for her to use, and when the bags were made we had only to lay them along the tops of the sashes to keep out effectually all draughts. I used to tell her then that they would prove very effective weapons, if properly used."

Before the detective ceased speaking in making his explanation, he had dived his head into the depths of the trunk and was searching about him assiduously; and presently he straightened up again, with two more of the same sort of bags in his grasp.

He was smiling now, if somewhat grimly.

"See," he said; "here is the explanation we need."

"Oh, is it? I confess that I do not see it," replied Chick.

"Don't you see that here are two more bags of the same sort, Chick?"

"Yes; but what of it?"

"Two of them were at the bottom of that trunk; the other one—the one that was used on Powers—was on the top of the other things."

"Well, I will have to ask again, what of it?"

"Let us suppose the situation here at the moment when Powers was struck down."

"That is about all we can do—suppose it."

"I am pretty well convinced, from what Millie said to me when I questioned her, that she found Powers here when she arrived. Evidently she had no idea that he would be here, and he had none that she would interrupt him. She would not be likely to dream that he would have occasion to come here, and still less de-

sire to do so, and he would suppose her to be safely locked up in the Tombs."

"Well?"

"Now, Chick, I haven't a doubt that when Powers entered this room he left the door open a crack, in order that he might hear the approach of any person. He wasn't used to burglarizing, and a manner of escape would be his first thought."

"But, first, why should he care to come here at all?"

"I don't know as to that—unless it was to get the same things that Millie came after. Perhaps when we read those letters we will be able to answer that question."

"Perhaps."

"Anyhow, it is beside the present question."

"Well?"

"If Powers did get here first, if he *did* leave the door open a crack so that he could note the approach of any other person, it follows that Millie came up the stairs so silently that he did not hear her. It follows also that when she got almost to the door, she saw the light through the open crack of it, and that after that she came still more silently. She would have tiptoed forward and peered into the room. She would have seen—for instance—the figure of Powers, bending over the edge of the open trunk, searching its contents."

Chick nodded.

"At that instant she may, or she may not, have recognized him. The probability is that she did not. She may even have gotten the idea that it was I."

"That isn't unlikely."

"Powers doubtless had already scattered many of the articles the trunk contained, about him on the floor, outside it, and among them this particular bag of sand, which was doubtless one of three which Dumont carried with him to use in draughty hotels. It is not unlikely that Millie made these bags herself, when she and Dumont were happy together, and that he had kept them in his possession for sentimental reasons. If she did make them, and saw one of them on the floor before the man with his head concealed inside the trunk, she knew what it was and how it might be made use of."

"I guess there is no doubt of that."

"If she *did* suppose that I was the man in the trunk, she lost no time in possessing herself of the weapon so easily at hand. It would be the work of an instant only to raise it, to swing it, and to deliver the blow that killed Powers. The force of it not only broke his neck, but it hurled him into the corner where we found him." Nick was silent a moment, and then continued:

"Don't you see that she must have recognized him too late? that she saw with horror the fact that she had struck down the man she had learned to love? the man for whom she murdered Dumont?"

Chick nodded.

"Mechanically, she tossed the red sandbag away from her, horrified by what she had done. It fell inside the trunk again, on top of the remaining things."

"But could Millie Slade strike so terrific a blow as that one was, Nick?"

"Certainly. Have you forgotten what her occupation has always been? A bareback-rider, an athlete like Millie, has muscles of steel, trained to perfection. Millie Slade is much more powerful in that way than the average man would be. If that sandbag, wielded with all the force she could bring into use, fell across the nape of the man's neck while he was bending forward with his head inside the trunk, his neck was broken instantly; even the force of the blow at the base of his brain would have killed him, and he would have been hurled into the corner where we found him."

"I guess you are right, Nick; but what of the tiger? Where does he happen, in this affair, do you think?"

"I should say that Prince happened on the scene right then. That is the way it looks to me," was the reply.

"And so frightened her into a fit, eh?"

"Frightened her so that she fainted away—for I happen to know that she feared the tiger more than anything else in the world."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE ACT.

"While we are here, Chick, and while Patsy is attempting to get on the trail of Millie Slade again, and before we inform the police-station and the coroner of the death of Christopher Powers, we may as well use the opportunity to search through the effects of James Dumont, which seem to have interested him and the bareback-rider so intently."

Chick stepped forward, and was about to continue a further examination of the trunk, when he suddenly stopped him, and said smilingly:

"Not there, Chick. As little as I know of Powers, I am sure that he would not leave papers he desired in such a place as a trunk, particularly if he did not

wish prying eyes to find them. We will search about in the other room, the room in which he lived. This room was only used for sleeping."

There was a desk in that front room, the property of the former occupant, and to this article of furniture the detective gave his attention. It was an ordinary desk, with a drop-front, and although the detective carefully examined every particle of its contents, he could find nothing of a personal nature which Powers and Millie Slade might have been interested in. Nor was there any other article in the room which suggested a different hiding-place.

Presently, however, it occurred to the detective to remove the small desk away from the wall, and in doing so the door of a small receptacle was disclosed, which opened in the back of it. It was locked, but by one of those flimsy contrivances which one may pick with a bent hairpin, and Nick quickly had it open, revealing several packages of letters tied together with red tape, and a number of photographs, among which were several of Dumont, the tiger-tamer, and Millie Slade, the equestrienne, taken together.

The remaining ones, with two exceptions, were of Millie herself in different poses and attitudes, and taken evidently at widely different periods of her career.

The two exceptions were what interested the detective most, since they proved to be very recent photographs, and represented Millie Slade and Christopher Powers, the dead man in the adjoining room.

"These pictures suggest a reason for Powers' visit here," said Nick, passing them to his assistant.

"Why so?" replied the latter.

"Because they are the sort of photographs that would not be likely to be found in the possession of Powers unless he had possessed himself of them by surreptitious means."

"I don't think I understand," said Chick.

"I must remind you then that at my first interview with Jim Dumont, the tiger-tamer, following the evening when Peg and I attended the circus together at his invitation, he told me in so many words that he feared assassination by Millie Slade. He confessed to me at that time that she was his wife. That they had been married ten years previously; had lived together rather less than two years and were then separated. He told me, if you will remember, that she had threatened his life more than once, and by innuendo and suggestion had frequently troubled him in like manner."

"Yes, I remember."

"It struck me at the time he was telling the story, Chick, that he had more information back of it than he chose to reveal, and now I think I know what he meant by that."

"Well, what did he mean?"

"I think he meant that he had documentary proof, not only that Millie was quite willing to make use of her remarkable achievement as a pistol-shot to assassinate him, but that Christopher Powers had done more or less to uphold her in the grim determination."

"I don't think I understand you yet."

"In order to do so, Chick, you must leave the present circumstances for the moment and bring your mind to bear on the fact that Millie Slade did eventually kill James Dumont by shooting him with the aid of one of her mechanical contrivances she called a right-angle target."

"Yes."

"I arrested her, charged her with the crime, and she confessed it. She was taken to prison, and while she was still supposed to be there in close confinement, Powers for some reason, which does not appear, broke his way into these rooms for the purpose of searching them."

"We are already aware of all that."

"Yes, but doesn't it occur to you that it must have needed a strong incentive indeed to induce Powers to take the risk in coming here to these rooms in the dead of night to break into them and search them?"

"Assuredly."

"Well, Chick, knowing all the circumstances as we do, being familiar with all the incidents of the case as we are, it seems to me that there could be only one incentive strong enough to force Powers to commit such an act."

"What would it be?"

"The only incentive that could have induced him to come here as he did come, and to take the risk he did take, would be the strong desire on his part to destroy evidence he knew to exist which would connect him with the commission of the crime that resulted in Dumont's death."

"I but half understand you, Nick," said the assistant.

"I think, Chick, unless I am greatly mistaken, that you will find the answer to the riddle in one or more of those packages of letters before us; for I thoroughly believe before I have touched them—now that I have seen these two pictures in which Powers' face appears—that one or more of those packages contained

letters written by Powers to Millie Slade which Dumont somehow possessed himself of."

"By Jove! I haven't thought of that."

"Don't you see that if he really feared assassination at the hand of one or both of those people; if he was as conversant with their plottings and plannings as his assertions to me would lead me to suppose, he would have taken every measure in his power to assure himself of the truth of the suspicions?"

"Yes."

"He would not have hesitated to break into Millie's quarters to search for letters she might have received from Powers; and if he found those letters, which I believe he did, and discovered in them statements in Powers' handwriting which would incriminate the man as an accessory to the murder then planned and later committed, Powers would dare everything and all things to secure possession of those letters to save himself from arrest and indictment as an accessory to the murder?"

"Yes, I do see it."

"We will go back a little once more. By doing so we can see that the theft of those letters and the two photographs you hold in your hand, hastened the moment of the assassination, for Millie of course missed them from among her things and there is no doubt that she told Powers they had been stolen."

"It wouldn't take them long to determine who was the thief," said Chick.

"Certainly not; and with Dumont dead, murdered while he slept by means of that right-angle target; with Millie under arrest, awaiting indictment at the Tombs, and with the knowledge that those incriminating letters were still among the effects of the dead man, Powers, as I said before, would dare everything and all things to secure possession of them."

"I see it now," said Chick.

"That was what brought him to these rooms, without a doubt," continued the detective. "Just how Millie succeeded in escaping from the Tombs and also appearing here, we do not yet know; but it is reasonable to suppose, reasonable, in fact, to assume that Powers had no idea she was at liberty, and therefore none that she would appear. Likewise it is reasonable to assume that, finding herself at liberty, for some reason that we do not now understand, she should hasten here to secure for herself possession of those letters, since by reason of their existence Powers was very greatly in her control, and she could dictate to him even from her cell in the Tombs if she was returned there."

"That seems to explain how they happened to meet here," said Chick.

"It is merely a coincidence," the detective went on, "that Prince should have escaped from the custody of Joseph at the very opportune moment he did; for had he not made his escape these documents would have disappeared, and the escape of Millie Slade would not have been discovered at least until morning."

"And Powers," said Chick, with a shrug, "would have returned to his duties as manager of the circus, confident that no shadow of suspicion could ever fall upon him."

"Exactly."

The detective reached forward then, and examined the packages of letters, one by one, smiling meaningly when he discovered that two of them were, as he had supposed, written by Christopher Powers to Millie Slade.

Letter by letter the two detectives opened and searched them, and they found many in which reference was made to the projected assassination of Dumont; and there was one letter written out at considerable length, which contained in plain terms the suggestion to Millie that she make use of her right-angle target to accomplish Dumont's death.

In that letter the circus-manager even went so far as to remind her of the habits of Dumont, who was known generally among his friends to pass his Sunday in negligée costume, reading the papers and smoking and to sleep away most of such afternoons in solitude in his rooms.

This particular letter was sufficiently incriminating in its character so that if it had been found among the effects of Dumont by the district-attorney or one of his assistants, it would undoubtedly have brought about the man's arrest, and gone a long way toward proving him equally guilty with Millie Slade in the murder of the tiger-tamer.

Here then was a full explanation of the presence of Christopher Powers in the studio apartment that night.

Beyond that they could not go save by inference, and that inference was, of course, as Nick Carter has already outlined it here.

If the facts of the case were as Nick Carter had conjectured them; if Powers had arrived at the rooms first, and after leaving the door open just a crack, was engaged in searching the depths of Dumont's trunk when Millie came softly up the stairs, she doubtless would have done exactly as Nick Carter had pictured her doing—would have stolen softly up behind the man, whom she believed to be the detective she had

learned to hate, and would have dealt the blow with the turkey-red sandbag which had broken Powers' neck and hurled him into a huddled heap on the floor in the corner at the very instant when he was attempting to rise to defend himself.

Thus far it seemed as if everything in connection with the case was made clear.

It was still a mystery how Millie Slade had left her prison-cell and gone to the studio apartment in the dead of night, and it was still a mystery how Prince, the Bengal tiger, had found his way there in time to interfere with what was going on, and to hold the tableau which Nick Carter ultimately discovered so strangely in his search for the tiger.

CHAPTER VII.

NICK CARTER'S STRANGEST ASSISTANT.

Concerning the escape of Millie Slade and her presence at the studio apartment at the critical moment, we had better explain at once, in order that the reader may not be left in doubt about it.

The fact of the matter was that she had not been transferred from the station-house to the Tombs, as Nick Carter had supposed, but remained at the precinct until after dark on the evening of her arrest.

Then orders came to make the transfer, and Millie was taken in charge by two police-officers, whose instructions were to deliver her to the warden of the city prison.

It was here that Millie's peculiar craft as a circus beauty and a fascinating woman came into full play.

It is not now known, and probably never will be, just how she bamboozled those two police-officers into permitting her to vanish for one moment from their sight; but that she did succeed in inducing them to enter a hotel with her for a moment, and to remain outside the door of the ladies' reception-room while she entered it, is known.

It is sufficient to say that, having passed through that door and closing it behind her, she did not reappear again, and the two officers who had her in charge, after waiting for a long time for her to return to them, at last made search for her only to discover that she had made good her escape.

They returned to the station-house and reported the fact, of course; and because it was reported to police headquarters; but the escape was one which the police authorities did not care to have known unless it were necessary, and the facts of it were therefore kept quiet while the city was being secured in the hope of recapturing her.

To Nick Carter, when he was made acquainted with these facts later on, there seemed no doubt that Millie upon escaping the vigilance of the two officers who had her in charge, had gone at once to the studio apartment, astutely surmising that it would not only be the very last place in all the city where search would be made for her, since it was the scene of her own crime, but she could also utilize the time while she waited there in securing the letters and documents she desired to obtain.

It was another coincidence that Powers should have selected the same night for his visit to the place, only, of course, it being the very first night after the arrest of Millie it was natural that he should undertake it, since it was desirable that he should lose no time in getting possession of those letters.

Concerning the manner in which the tiger found its way back to those rooms, there might be many conjectures. For one, it is the natural instinct of a cat to find its way back to the place of former habitation; but to Nick Carter there was a stronger conjectural reason for the incident.

The hotel to which Millie had been taken by the policemen, and from which she had made her escape, was located so that in leaving it and desiring to go from it straight to the studio apartment her route would be directly past Nick Carter's door.

This Millie Slade could not know, since she had no idea of his street address; but the fact remained that the most direct route between the hotel and the apartment was past his house.

Now Nick Carter, in returning to his home with the tiger, after he had recaptured it, discovered that the animal had made its escape from Joseph in the most natural way possible.

Being left alone in the room where it was confined, it became restless, and after wandering about the place probably struck with its paws against the door, and in so doing turned the knob sufficiently so that it sprang open.

Any cat perceiving that a door which it desires to pass is slightly ajar has sufficient sagacity to move it farther open with its nose; and after that was done, Prince had only to pass leisurely down the stairs to the parlor floor, from whence egress was easy through the windows, which stood open at the time, the month being June and the weather unusually warm.

Joseph, usually on guard, happened to be absent at the moment, and the tiger, swinging first to the left

outside, thence to the front steps, and so on to the pavement, undoubtedly came upon the trail of Millie Slade soon after she has passed that spot.

This, to be sure, was all conjecture, but it was, nevertheless, the result of logical reasoning, and it served to explain, at least to the satisfaction of the detective, the return of Prince to the apartment of his former master.

There was no friendliness existing between the woman and the tiger; the former hated Jim Dumont with a cordial hatred that had ended in his death; the latter had loved him as only a docile and devoted animal can love.

We will suppose then that the creature, alighting upon the pavement in front of Nick Carter's house, scented the trail of the woman he disliked. It was, nevertheless, the scent of a person whom he recognized, and his natural instinct would be to follow her at once.

That the trail took him to the house where Jim Dumont had lived and had been killed, we already know, and that the tiger arrived there very soon after Millie did so, cannot be doubted, since what we have seen and are familiar with the general circumstances.

To go on with surmises regarding what happened there, resulting in the death of Powers and the death-like faint of Millie Slade, it is supposable that the tiger pushed open the door and entered the room within a moment or so after the woman had dealt the terrible blow with the sandbag.

Horrified by what she had done; realizing that she had killed the man she loved best, after mistaking him for another, herself only just freed from the clutches of the law and at every moment in danger of recapture, her consternation and terror can better be imagined than described when, upon turning about, she found herself face to face with her Nemesis in the form of Prince, the tiger.

Is it any wonder that she fainted then?

Is it any wonder that her mind was temporarily unbalanced by the horror of it all?

The whole circumstance seemed very plain to Nick Carter's judgment now, and while he stood there near the desk, after the examination of the letters, he dropped them all suddenly, and started away, exclaiming as he did so:

"Chick, you will have to remain here and take charge of things. Act exactly as you would do if I had not been here at all. I have got an idea, and to put it in effect I must move without delay."

"What is it?" asked Chick.

"The tiger!" exclaimed the detective, and, without waiting to make further explanation, he dashed from the room and down the stairs at full speed, turning toward Broadway when he reached the bottom, and running with all speed until he arrived at the nearest hotel he could find.

There he entered a telephone-booth, and called up the headquarters of the taxicab company, insisting at once that he be put into communication with the night-manager.

"Before I tell you what I want," he said then over the telephone to the manager, "give directions that one of your cabs, and a good one, be sent here to the Victoria Hotel for me. I want it to get here as quickly as possible. Now, please give the order and return to the telephone."

There was a moment of silence, after which he heard the manager's voice again, and he inquired if Patsy had yet appeared there to make inquiries about the taxicab in which Millie Slade had been taken as a passenger.

It was Patsy's voice that replied to him, for the manager had evidently given place to the young assistant at once, upon hearing the question; and Patsy said, without preamble:

"The cab which took Millie has just driven in. The driver says he took her to the corner of Fifty-first Street and Fifth Avenue, where she dismissed him; and that is all he knows about her."

"All right," said Nick; "now pay attention to what I wish to say to you."

"Very good, chief."

"Get back into the same cab and have the driver take you to that corner; stop there and wait until I come. Has the cab started here after me yet?"

Being assured that it had, the detective hung up the 'phone, and a few moments later when the cab arrived he jumped into it, directing that it be driven as rapidly as possible to his own house.

Nick Carter had many times in his career used strange methods for trailing down a fugitive from justice, but he had never in his life resorted to so strange a precedent as now.

Arrived at his own house, he dashed up the steps and into it, a moment later returned to the street again, with the docile Prince tagging after him.

The frightened taxicab chauffeur almost fainted away when he saw the huge and fierce-looking tiger, and was directed to open the door for its accommodation; but the voice of the detective reassured the man, the door was opened, and Prince, now having

been quite accustomed to riding in cabs, entered the vehicle at a word from his master.

"Fifth Avenue and Fifty-first Street," was the order that the detective gave to the chauffeur then, "and cover the distance as quickly as you can."

So the two, the man and the tiger, were wheeled away on their strange journey, beginning at half-past three o'clock in the morning at the time of year when the days are longest and when within half an hour daylight would be upon them.

But Nick had bethought himself to secure the muzzle and collar and leash with which the tiger was sometimes led, and now, as they dashed along the avenue toward the appointed place, he affixed them.

Patsy with the other chauffeur were awaiting the detective when he arrived, and by Nick's request the latter pointed out the spot where he had last seen Millie Slade when he left her there.

"Now, Patsy," said the detective, "I am convinced in my own mind that Prince has already trailed Millie Slade once to-night. If I am right about that he will do it again.

"I am going to take him over there and put him on her track, and then I shall let him lead me wheresoever he will. You may send your cab back to the station. Tell the other chauffeur to follow us along wherever we go, and to be prepared to pick us up at any moment. For yourself, you had better follow along on foot at a little distance behind me."

The detective led the tiger to the indicated spot, and then stepped back while he narrowly watched what action the animal would take.

He was not long left in doubt as to that, for the moment the huge beast stood over the spot on the pavement where Millie Slade had passed, he laid his ears down ever so little and uttered a low growl, which was scarcely audible.

Then, without an instant's hesitation, he started forward at a slow trot, which nevertheless compelled the detective to run to keep pace with him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FLITTING OF MILLIE SLADE.

It was a new kind of sleuth which Nick Carter had thus pressed into his service, and the detective was in constant fear lest at any moment they might come upon persons who would be frightened out of their wits by the spectacle of a Bengal tiger running through the streets of New York, apparently dragging a man after him. That the tiger was muzzled and leashed were merely trivial facts, for the great strength of the detective would have amounted to nothing, had the tiger sought to escape him, and neither the leash nor the muzzle would have held him for a moment had he sought to break them.

The animal led them straight westward through Fifty-first Street as far as Broadway, which was crossed, after which the animal turned toward the south one block, and presently sought to enter the subway entrance on the downtown side of Fiftieth Street, and would have done so, had not a sharp command from the detective brought it to a halt.

"Our trail must end here," said the detective, "at least so far as the tiger is concerned. There is no doubt that Millie went into the subway, and has taken a south-bound train."

The taxicab, which had followed them closely up to this point, was now summoned to their side, and the tiger, after giving evidence of considerable reluctance to obey, was compelled to enter it again.

"Where now?" asked Patsy, when upon a sign from the detective he had followed his chief into the cab.

But Nick was already calling to the chauffeur, and he directed the man to take them as quickly as possible to the Thirty-third Street exits from the subway, on the downtown side.

Nick did not answer the question at once, but continued in deep thought until they had traveled some distance; then he replied, with apparent irrelevance:

"I am depending upon the tiger, Patsy."

"How so?" asked the latter.

"Well, lad, I have figured it out that Millie wasn't half so crazy up there in the studio apartment as she tried to make me believe."

"Evidently not."

"The fact that she made her escape as she did would go far to prove that."

"Yes."

"I have figured it out that when she leaped into the taxicab she called out to the driver to take her wherever he would so long as she escaped from me, and so he drove her up Fifth Avenue, after turning two corners, until she stopped him."

"Well?" said Patsy.

"We have already had indications of the shrewdness of Millie Slade."

"We certainly have."

"She would pass her time while riding in the cab in figuring out a method of escape. She would know

that I would experience very little difficulty in locating the cab in which she so suddenly became a passenger, and therefore she left it up in the air, so to speak; that is to say, she left it on the corner of Fifty-first Street and Fifth Avenue.

"As soon as the cab drove away she decided to take the subway at Fiftieth Street, realizing that even if we traced her to that spot, as we might do, we could not know where she left the train."

"Exactly."

"But, Patsy, she forgot all about the tiger."

"What do you mean by that statement?"

"I mean, my lad, that the tiger will tell us where she left the subway."

"But, how? I don't understand."

"Patsy, you can bank upon it that when Millie Slade entered the subway she did so because she wanted to find the quickest route possible out of the city."

"Well."

"The first one below Fiftieth Street would be Grand Central Station; but she would not select that for the double reason that more than likely she would have to wait a long time at this hour of the morning before the departure of a train, and because the place is so public that she would be remembered by any policeman standing about who chanced to see her waiting."

Patsy nodded.

"The next place where she could leave the subway with a view to getting out of the city would be Thirty-third Street, where she could take a car to the Long Island ferry. The next place would be Twenty-third Street, where she could take a car westward to several ferries.

"Fourteenth Street would offer the next inducement; but if she passed that point I think it likely that she would continue on the train to one of the down-town stations, from which she would walk to one of the North River railroad ferries.

"However, we can know nothing about that until we test it. But the point, Patsy, is this: The hour is still so early in the morning that very few people are passing in and out of the subway stations. If she has left the train at Thirty-third Street station the tiger will detect her presence at one of the exits. If he does not do it there, he will discover it at one of the other places I have named, if only we can arrive at them soon enough."

Patsy leaned back in his seat and blew a stream of cigar-smoke through the window beside him. Presently he chuckled:

"It reminds me of Frank Stockton's great story, with a little bit of change in the title. In this case it would be, "The Lady *and* the Tiger."

Nick made no reply, and presently they arrived at the exit from the subway at Thirty-third Street, and here, while Patsy remained in the cab, Nick took the tiger from it, and led him to both exits until convinced that Millie Slade had not passed that way.

The journey was then continued to Twenty-third Street, where the same result was obtained.

Fourteenth Street, and after that, one by one, every exit from the subway downtown, until they arrived at the Dey Street entrance of the Fulton Street station, resulted the same, but at the latter the tiger again gave evidence of having hit upon the scent.

Nick looked at Patsy, with an expression of exultation in his face, as he remarked:

"I don't think we need to follow her trail with the tiger from this point."

"Why not?" asked Patsy.

"Because it is only too evident that she has gone directly to the Courtlandt Street ferry. Climb into the cab, Patsy. We'll get there as quickly as possible."

"But what are you going to do with the tiger?"

"I am going to take him along, of course."

"Do you realize, chief, that it will be daylight presently, and that we will be getting into trouble if we keep this animal with us?"

"Not so long as we keep him inside the cab."

"But what good will the tiger do you if he's inside the cab? He can't do any more trailing."

"Wait," said the detective, and they lapsed into silence, while they were taken to the Courtlandt Street ferry-house.

There is never an hour of the day when there are not more or less people gathered about such a place, and this particular hour of four o'clock in the morning, or a little after, was no exception to the rule.

Nick left his assistant—or, rather, as the case happened to be at the moment, his two assistants—in the cab while he went forward and entered the ferry-house to make inquiries.

The surest way of discovering what he sought was to question the man at the window, who took the fares from the passengers, and he quickly and quite graphically described Millie Slade to this sleepy individual, detailing to him her personal appearance, as well as the costume she wore, and not forgetting the peculiar brilliancy of her greenish-hued eyes.

The man remembered her.

"Oh, yes, she had a Philadelphia ticket. She crossed

on the boat before the last one, thirty-five minutes ago."

Nick returned to the taxicab then.

"Patsy," he said, "do you think that you and Prince can get along without quarreling if I send you back alone with him?"

"Gee, chief, I don't know. It'll be the first time I ever rode alone in a taxicab with a tiger, but I'll try it."

"You're not afraid, Patsy?"

"Not a little bit, chief."

Nick leaned forward, and putting his arms around the tiger's neck whispered to him in Hindustanee, addressing the animal by the endearing terms that Dumont had taught him. Just what he said to the creature it is not necessary to repeat, but that Prince understood perfectly well there was no sort of doubt, for he composed his huge shape on the forward seat of the taxicab, dragged his head upon his paws, and otherwise gave evidence of his entire willingness to accept the inevitable.

Leaving the cab to speed away homeward, Nick Carter reentered the ferry-house and crossed the river by the boat which left the slip five minutes later.

Arrived on the other side, he again made inquiries of the gateman who had had charge of the entrance to the Philadelphia train, which had departed only a little while before, and now a surprise awaited him, for he could find no evidence that Millie had taken that train.

For a moment he stood there, wishing he had gone so far as to bring the tiger across the river with him, for it flashed upon him that Millie's shrewdness had led her to suppose that Nick Carter might trail her as far as the ferry-house, and so discover that she had purchased a ticket for Philadelphia.

If that were so, it was likely that she had decided at the last moment to forfeit her ticket and adopt another route.

He began then a system of inquiries, going from man to man around the ferry-house and station, repeating again and again the description of Millie Slade which he gave so graphically that no one could mistake it if one had seen her.

But it was not until he had actually left the ferry-house and passed out upon the street opposite the spot where Taylor's Hotel used to stand, that he hit upon any sort of clue.

There, however, he found three hack-drivers, each eager to secure him as a fare, and calling them aside, one by one, he questioned them about the woman he sought.

You will see in this fact that he did call them aside in order to question them, an evidence of the knowledge and experience that is necessary to one in Nick Carter's profession.

Three hack-drivers standing, as they were, awaiting a fare and eager for one, would not hesitate to give wilfully wrong information, and to mislead a man like Nick, if by doing so a little extra money could be made; but if they were called aside one by one and thus collusion were avoided, it was possible to get correct information or none at all.

Strangely enough, however, these three men all agreed, and their stories were that the woman whom Nick Carter described to them had taken a fourth hack, which was there at the time, and had been driven rapidly away through Montgomery Street, whither they did not know, and had no means of discovering until the other hack-driver should return.

There was nothing for the detective to do then but to wait, and he composed himself with such patience as he could command until the fourth hack-driver should arrive.

An hour passed in this way, and then a second, and it was near the close of the third hour that Nick Carter had waited before the driver reappeared, his horse jaded.

"Sure," he said, in reply to Nick's question, "I drove the lady, and a liberal one she was, too."

"Where did you take her?" asked Nick.

"Faith, I got me price for taking her there, and by your leave, I'll have to have a price to tell you where it was."

The price was forthcoming in the shape of a dollar bill, which the man seized upon eagerly, grinning as he did so, and he said:

"I drove her from here to Pavonia, to the Erie Railroad station; but if you was to give me a hundred dollars instead of one, I couldn't tell you where she went then after she left the hack."

CHAPTER IX.

A VERY NARROW ESCAPE.

It was then eight o'clock in the morning. Millie Slade, wherever she might be at that moment, had at least three hours' start of the detective, for he had waited approximately that length of time at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station in Jersey City for the return

of the hack-driver who had taken the equestrienne away.

That the man had told the truth about taking Millie to Pavonia, Nick did not doubt; neither did he doubt that the woman had successfully eluded him for the time being.

Pavonia, by land, is a long way from Jersey City. By trolley or by carriage, it is a devious route at best. By far the quickest way to get from one place to the other is to cross to New York by ferry and recross again at Chambers Street.

But with the time the woman had had at her disposal for eluding him, Nick felt that it was almost useless for him to pursue her to Pavonia on the slim chance that one of the men who worked about the station there would remember having seen her; and, besides, all the crews in the employ of the railroads at the stations change at seven—or by seven—in the morning. Millie would have passed through the station before the change was made, and there would be no one on duty now who could have seen her.

After turning the matter over in his mind, he resolved to return to the city, and to take up the other thread of the chase—and by the other thread he meant that he would begin among Millie's friends, and from them obtain some idea regarding the direction she had probably taken in her flight.

It is always a fact that information of our slightest intentions is left somewhere.

There is no person so reticent that a word is not dropped here and there which, if taken up and associated with other words of like nature, will form a whole. It is this ability to group information which makes the good detective.

The word "clue" has a great deal more significance to the mind of a detective than the layman supposes. Clue does not mean merely the finding of something that a fugitive has dropped by the way; or a significant word that has been uttered; or a bit of handwriting; or anything of that kind. What it does mean is this: The relation of something found to other things known.

Nick started for the boat that would take him to Twenty-third Street on the New York side, but finding that he would have to wait nearly twenty minutes before such a boat would start, he returned to the Courtlandt Street ferry—and in that small fact was contained one of those chances which many of the detective's friends and acquaintances denominated as "Carter's luck," but which in reality are merely natural happenings; for, although we may in our daily lives make many changes of route which we call lucky, we can never know how often we have been unlucky by turning the wrong way.

He crossed to Courtlandt Street, therefore, and passed out upon West Street, among the big throng of commuters who arrived by the same boat; and he started up Courtlandt Street toward the elevated road; but he had not gone half a block before his attention was attracted by a crowd that had gathered around a red taxicab at the opposite side of the street.

Nick glanced in that direction idly at first; then with more interest, for in the brief glance he had seen and recognized Patsy and also the chauffeur who had brought him and the tiger to the ferry, much earlier in the day.

There was a dense ring of humanity gathered around the cab, and the crowd was augmented with every moment, until it threatened to block the street.

In the forefront of all of it half a dozen policemen had gathered, and one of them had a huge revolver in his hand, while Patsy was clinging to his arm, and apparently expostulating with the officer.

Nick Carter took in the situation at a glance.

He realized that for some inexplicable reason Patsy with the tiger for a companion, had been detained in the vicinity of the ferry. Either the cab had refused to operate, or something of the sort had happened to detain the assistant and Prince in that public place. He realized also that he had arrived himself, only just in time, for he could see that the officer whom Patsy was holding by the arm was intent upon shooting the tiger.

The utter folly of such a proceeding startled Nick much more than the danger to the pet tiger; for a bullet from the revolver the policeman carried could do little injury to the beast, unless it were planted with exactitude—and that was not likely to be the case, to judge from the exhibitions of marksmanship Nick had seen demonstrated by the bluecoats.

But the bullet, if fired, would enrage the animal; it would make a fierce destroyer of an otherwise gentle creature.

There could be no estimate placed upon the damage the tiger might do if the officer did succeed in firing that bullet before Nick Carter could get there to prevent it.

The instant he recognized his assistant and realized what was taking place, he leaped into the street, shouldered his way through the crowd, paying little attention to whom he jostled as he advanced, and so insistent was his advance that he bored his way through

the throng to the very center of the scene, in much less time than it takes to tell of it.

With one sweep of his arm, he seized the officer's wrist and tore the weapon from his grasp; and then he pushed the astonished policeman's burly figure aside and springing to the door of the cab, which was closed, although the window of it was open, he backed up against it, and faced the threatening crowd.

"You idiot!" he exclaimed to the policeman, with fine scorn in his tones. "Don't you know that if you fired that bullet into the tiger, he would tear that cab to pieces and kill half a dozen or more of the men standing around here?"

He turned then to glance inside the cab, and he could see that the animal had begun to lash its tail against its sides, and to show other evidences of losing its temper. It did not like the crowd and the noises and the general excitement by which it was surrounded, and Nick understood that if he had been a few moments later on the scene something might have happened.

As it was, he pulled open the door a little way and leaned inside the cab; then he put one arm around the tiger's neck, whispered to it in Hindustanee, and with the result that Prince quieted down at once, began to purr, and otherwise manifested its own sense of security in having Nick Carter with it again.

Reclosing the door, Nick turned a second time to face the crowd; and he saw, somewhat to his momentary dismay, that the several policemen were now advancing in a body, apparently determined that this man who had so suddenly appeared upon the scene, should not run things in their precinct.

But they didn't know Nick Carter—that is, not yet.

Having closed the door, he placed his back against it. Then he raised one hand to demand attention, and he called out:

"Stop! All of you! Stop where you are! Now, listen to me a moment!"

"We'll listen to you all right when——" began one of the officers; but the detective interrupted him.

"Shut up!" he said. "Wait till I have finished; then if you want to have your say, you shall have the opportunity. This tiger is my personal property; he is as harmless as a pet dog, unless you anger him or tease him; but if that happened, I would not answer for the consequences. My friends, doubtless a good many of you have attended Hindpaugh's Circus, now showing at the Garden. If you have done so, you have seen the tigers perform."

A murmur of assent went up from the crowd.

"This tiger," continued the detective, "was the leader of the troup—the one called by the name of Prince. This is Prince, the king of them all. Now, listen."

There was another murmur of applause at this; but the detective went on rapidly:

"You have all read in the papers how the tiger-tamer, Jim Dumont, was murdered last Sunday afternoon, while he was asleep on the couch in his room. Some of you know that the woman who shot him was arrested yesterday morning; if you don't know it you have only to look in the papers this morning to find out all about it."

"We know!" was the response that came from many who listened.

"Well," continued Nick, "that woman escaped. This tiger knows her and can follow her trail, once he finds it, better than any bloodhound. I have been using him all the past night in the effort to track her down and rearrest her. Gentlemen! Officers! I am Nick Carter, so I hope you will quietly withdraw and permit me to take the tiger away with me."

For a moment after the announcement there was absolute silence in the crowd, while the men who were there digested the intelligence; then a cheer began somewhere on the outskirts and was taken up by the others until the street rang with it; and then, as if by common consent and out of respect for the detective's wishes, the throng began to break up and within five minutes the street was as clear as it ever is at that hour on a week-day morning.

Nick seized upon the opportunity to explain with rather more detail to the policemen, and they also presently withdrew to a respectful distance, save only that they waited in the vicinity until the man and the tiger should take their departure.

"Now tell me what happened," said the detective, turning at last to his assistant.

"It's the old story of the automobile not working," returned Patsy. "Something wrong with the carburetor, I think; but, you see, in fussing with the engine and in cranking the car over and over again, Prince became uneasy, and finally he stuck his head out of the window."

"That drew a crowd, I suppose?" said the detective, smiling.

"Yes; and as if that were not enough, Prince roared out a sort of protest. I really had all I could do to quiet him, and I don't know what would have happened if you had not appeared on the scene."

"I see. Is the engine all right now?"

"Yes. We had just got it in working order when that fool-cop insisted upon shooting the tiger. Gee! If he had done that——"

"It is lucky that I happened along just as I did. You have had quite a scene here; about three and a half hours of it altogether."

"No; only about twenty minutes of actual trouble. Before that time nobody suspected that there was a tiger inside the cab. Where shall I tell the chauffeur to take us, chief?"

"Home."

The order was given and they got inside the cab with the tiger, who purred gratefully at the presence of Nick Carter.

"I take it that you lost the trail of Millie Slade?" Patsy said then.

"Yes. She 'beat it' all right."

"It is a smart woman who gets away from you like that, chief."

"She hasn't gotten away—yet," was the reply.

"What are you going to do now? How will you trace her?"

"I haven't determined, just yet; but she shall be found; and she can't get very far away. But I have an idea that among her friends at the circus I can pick up some information that will put me on her track again. At least, I shall go to see them as soon as I have had a bath and a change of linen. I am going then to see old Adam Hindpaugh himself."

"Eh? What for?"

"I don't know, yet; not until I have seen him."

"But——"

"Be silent now, Patsy. I want to think."

And from that moment not a word was uttered between the two men during the drive in the cab to Nick Carter's home in Madison Avenue.

Arrived there, Prince obediently followed the detective to the room where it had been installed since it came to Nick Carter's house.

Quiet was restored again, after a most exciting seven hours.

CHAPTER X.

NICK CARTER'S STRANGE BARGAIN.

Nick Carter had not been in his house an hour when a messenger called with a letter. It was from Adam Hindpaugh, the proprietor of the "Wonderful Aggregation of World-renowned Spectacular Specialists," etc., etc., and it said:

"My Dear Mr. Carter: Luck seems to have picked me out as a victim. First, my tiger-tamer is killed; then my bareback rider and dead-shot performer is arrested for the killing; then my manager croaks, as I have just been informed. If this sort of thing keeps up I might as well go out of business. I am surely handicapped for this afternoon and evening, so far as the performance is concerned—*unless you can help me out.*

"I wonder if you will consent to do it in a manner that has occurred to me, which will do you no harm, and which will do me a great deal of good? You see, you have got Prince in your possession, and Prince was one of my star performers; one of my very greatest attractions, notwithstanding the fact that he was not my property.

"This will give you an idea of what I want to see you about; but in order that I may fully explain it to you, will you come around to the Garden as soon as you receive this and have a talk with me? Surely you cannot refuse so simple a request, and I will be eternally grateful. Yours truly,

"Adam Hindpaugh."

The detective returned word by the messenger that he would call around at the Garden as soon as he could conveniently do so, and then, having finished what he had to do, having paid Prince a last visit before starting out, and after giving directions for his care, Nick hastened to the Garden to find out what it was that Hindpaugh wanted.

For the request for an interview had come at a moment when Nick was about to seek one, as we know; but he had no idea what the proprietor of the circus was getting at when he wrote the strangely worded letter.

The detective found Hindpaugh in his private office, and the great circus man, after pushing a box of big, black cigars within reach of the detective, exclaimed:

"Mr. Carter, I am very glad to see you! I'm in an awful fix. Four of my star acts are cut out completely by what has happened since Sunday afternoon. I want you to help me out."

"Four acts?" replied Nick interrogatively.

"Yes—four."

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, there is Dumont's act with the tigers; that's one. There is the bareback act; that's number two. There is the dead-shot act, which goes with the bareback business; that is three. And then—there is Prince himself. He makes a very big fourth. For I want to tell you right now that Prince was the very

best drawing-card I had, with the possible exception of Millie Slade's shooting. See?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have tried to buy Prince from you, and you won't sell him. You've got some sort of a fool-notion about giving him to the zoo. Don't be offended at anything I say, for I am a plain-spoken man, and I'm in a heap of trouble."

"Go ahead."

"If you will sell the tiger——"

"I won't. That settles that, Mr. Hindpaugh. I promised Dumont that Prince should be taken out of the show business if anything happened to him, and the ownership of the tiger came to me; and I am one of those fellows who keep promises."

"Well, will you *lend* him to me—for the balance of the week?"

"No; that would be in the line of breaking my word."

"Confound your word! But that brings me to the point of this interview."

"Yes? Well?"

"You see, I more than half-expected you to answer me as you have done, and so I thought out another method of getting around the difficulty—if you will consent to it. And, say, Carter; don't go off half-cocked when you hear the question. Turn it over in your mind before you answer it. Promise me that you will wait five seconds by the watch before you say yes or no after you have heard it. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is the question: Will you come over to the show yourself to-night, for the evening performance, and go into the ring-cage yourself, *with Prince?* Now, wait. Those five seconds don't begin to work till I get through talking. You can put on any sort of disguise you care to. Prince will know you by scent, and he won't make any difference how you are dressed. Nobody in the audience need know that you are Nick Carter; and, say! If I can boil the town this afternoon with the statement that Prince will appear in the ring to-night—Prince, the tiger that was in the room with Jim Dumont when he was shot, and a lot more that I can add to the announcement—well! You can see for yourself that it'll go a long way toward pulling the show, and I can jam the Garden as it was never jammed before. Now, take out your watch and wait five seconds before you reply. If it will be any inducement to you, I will bestow a thousand dollars upon any charity you will name, if you'll do it. There!"

The detective waited the five seconds, but with a smile on his face which reassured the circus-owner; and at the end of the time Nick replied calmly:

"I don't see any objection to granting your request, Hindpaugh. I'll do it—on a condition."

"Bully for you! I'll accept the condition, whatever it is, before you name it."

"The condition is double in its nature. First, for the performance to-morrow afternoon you will advertise to give a free admission to every boy and girl who applies for it, and who is between the ages of ten and sixteen; the second is that you spend the thousand dollars in giving a free feed, after the performance, to every kid so admitted. Does that go?"

"You bet it goes!"

"Then, it is a bargain. I will appear to-night, and *to-night only.*"

"Good; that is all I ask."

"And now I want to ask you a question or two—or more."

"Well?"

"I don't suppose you have heard that Millie Slade has made her escape, have you? It is not in the papers as yet."

"No? You don't say so! Well, well, well! Now, what do you think of that?"

"It was Millie who killed your manager."

"What? "

The detective took the time at that point to explain the circumstances fully to the circus-owner, who listened with some dismay, but without venturing upon any comment—a fact which surprised the detective at the time, and which he had occasion to recall afterward.

"Now," he said, in conclusion, "it is up to me to find Millie Slade again, and I have got a hunch that you can help me to do it, Hindpaugh. If you cannot do it at the present moment, I think that something is likely to occur which will put you in the line of doing it later on."

"What do you mean by that, Carter?"

"I mean that I think Millie will communicate with you, or with some one connected with the show. If she does that, I want to know about it. That is what I mean."

The circus-man was silent for a moment; then he said, with some abruptness:

"Look here, Carter, you have been decent to me in

this matter of the tiger; I'll try and be as decent with you."

"Thank you."

"I think that I can help you out, just as you have agreed to help me out; but I can't do it to-day. I just cannot do it to-day."

"Why not?"

"Because it's impossible, that's all. But to-morrow—well, that is another matter. I have got a pretty big piece of machinery in this show, as you can imagine."

"Indeed, I do."

"I'll put that machinery to work to-day, in the affair of Millie—just as I have already got it to working to fill her place in the show, and Dumont's, too. It is only the performance for to-night that I was worried about. You have helped me out in that, and I will help you out in your affair—to-morrow. Are you satisfied with that promise?"

"Yes. Do I understand that you have got some one to take Dumont's place in the show?"

"Yes; I will only lack Prince. But I had given that up."

"And have you also secured some one to fill Millie's place?"

"Sure, I have! She'll appear to-night, too. She is just as good a rider, although she says she isn't as good a shot with the pistol. However, she is going to try the whole act, and I have consented to let her try."

"Are you quite sure that it isn't Millie herself, who has returned to you under another name?" asked the detective, with a smile.

"Say, Carter! Don't you suppose I would know Millie Slade?"

"I should suppose you would; yes."

"Well, this woman calls herself Madam Maritza. Millie is a blonde; this woman is as dark as an Egyptian. Millie is about thirty years old; this woman is fifty, if she is a day, to look at her closely. Anyhow, I have found a substitute. It only remains to see how she will do the act. And, by the way, Carter."

"Well?"

"I don't suppose you are enough of a tiger-tamer, are you, to go on with all the tigers that Dumont used to play with? Eh?"

"No; I think not. It is hardly in my line. I don't mind doing the act with Prince, for I have perfect confidence in him, but when it comes to the others, I think I will draw the line, Mr. Hindpaugh."

"Oh, all right; only, of course, if you appear *only* with Prince, you won't have the entire arena all to yourself, in the middle ring, as Dumont used to have it. There will have to be other acts going on at the same time; eh?"

"Do as you please about that, Hindpaugh.

"Thank you. I have got a specialty in my mind which I think would prove a crackajack. I won't bother you by telling you about it now, because it won't make any difference to you."

"No."

"All you will have to do will be to appear at the right time; to take Prince across the ring into the big cage in the middle ring and make him go through his tricks with you. You can do all that, can't you?"

"Yes."

"And you won't fail to show up on time, eh?"

"No. I will be here soon after seven, with the tiger."

"Then, that is all settled. You see the thing through for to-night, and I won't forget my promise to you for to-morrow."

"All right, Hindpaugh."

"Carter, whatever you do, never go into the circus-business. It makes a fellow sweat blood at times; it does, really."

"I haven't a doubt of it; but I have no intention of going into the business—only for to-night."

"Well, I'll expect you. I suppose you can bring Prince in a cab? Eh?"

"Easily."

CHAPTER XI.

PRINCE, THE TIGER, SCENTS A FOE.

The detective had occasion to smile to himself more than once that afternoon while he was on his way between his home and police headquarters, where he went to have a talk with the commissioner.

He had not been gone from his interview with the proprietor of the circus fifteen minutes before an army of bill-posters were in the field—that is, were scattered throughout the city—posting up bills which Hindpaugh had already ordered printed, believing that Nick Carter would not refuse the request he was to make.

It was true that on the face of those bills the identity of Nick Carter was not mentioned; but, nevertheless, any person at all familiar with the events of the last few days would have experienced no difficulty in guessing who it was who intended to appear with the wonderful tiger called Prince.

The name of the tiger was emblazoned in e[illegible]

tters. Below it was the announcement that a celebrated character, known all the way around the world, from ocean to ocean, on both hemispheres, would appear with the tiger.

"This world-renowned and wonderful man, whose real name is known in every household," the announcement continued, "will put the famous tiger, Prince, through all the tricks he performed with his former master, Dumont, now dead—foully murdered—and will introduce a few new tricks hitherto unknown in wild-animal training. There is a prize of one hundred dollars offered to the man or woman who first guesses the identity of this man, and who announces the fact by writing the name on a piece of paper and giving it to one of the ushers who will at once jot down the time of the guess," etc., etc., etc.

There was a great deal more of this sort of stuff, which it is not necessary to repeat here, as it has nothing particularly to do with the case in hand.

But it all tended in the way that Hindpaugh had intended it should do; it called a crowd to the Garden, such as had rarely crowded its spaces before.

When Nick Carter was driven to the Garden in company with the tiger—Patsy went with him also, and Chick made one of the audience, for both wished to witness the performance—Mr. Hindpaugh met him at the performers' door in person, and individually conducted the detective and his two companions to the dressing-room that had lately been at the disposal of Jim Dumont.

"Carter, I am glad you have showed up!" he exclaimed, not too grammatically, but with undoubted emphasis. "I was afraid, till I saw you, that something would happen to prevent; and you know with all those bills out, such a thing would have been terrible."

Nick laughed.

"Look here, Hindpaugh," he said, "I think you have played it on me a little bit about those bills. You might about as well have printed my name."

"I wanted to do it, Carter; and that's no idle jest. But I was afraid you wouldn't stand for it a little bit."

"I wouldn't, either."

"Well, then, what are you kicking about?"

"Nothing at all. Shall I dress now?"

"Whenever you're ready. You don't appear till about nine o'clock, or a little after."

"All right. There is plenty of time in that case."

"What sort of a costume are you going to wear, Carter?" asked the circusman.

"The costume of a Hindu, turban and all," was the reply. "I have rehearsed it with the tiger this afternoon. He seems to like it, too. And I shall talk Hindustanee to him, all the time we are in the ring. By the way, has your new woman—Madam Maritza—shown up?"

"Oh, yes; she is here all right."

"And the other tigers, Hindpaugh? What are you going to do with them, during my act, for if I read you right this afternoon when we were talking together, you had something up your sleeve all the time?"

"I really suppose I ought to tell you about that, Carter."

"I think you ought—if you want me to carry out the act," was the significant reply.

"Well, you said you didn't care to appear inside the cage with all the beasts, and I do not blame you for that. But I thought you wouldn't mind if they were there, in the rings, where the audience could see them, so long as strong iron bars were between you and them. That is all right, isn't it, Carter?"

"I suppose so. Go on. What else?"

"I have fixed up a pair of semicircular cages, to fit on either side of the big one in which you and Prince appear. The other tigers will be in those other cages, but they can't get near you, although not half a dozen persons in the audience will realize that. They will think that you are all in the same cage together. It is one of the tricks of the show business. Any objections?"

"No. What else?"

"Well, I have changed the program in another particular."

"In what particular?"

"I'm going to have Maritza on the scene at the same time you appear."

"Oh, you are, eh?"

"Yes."

"What is the object of that, Hindpaugh?"

"Why, to add to the attraction. You are to take the place of Dumont, in a measure, don't you see? And Maritza is to take the place of Millie. That is the whole story. Dumont is dead, murdered by Millie. Bang! There you are! Now, what do you think of it?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders and did not reply. After all, it made no difference to him what arrangements Hindpaugh chose to conclude. His only duty in the matter was to appear in the arena as he had agreed, to exhibit Prince—and he had con-

scented to do it only because he believed that by so doing he would the more quickly receive information that would again put him on the track of Millie Slade.

In the meantime, Prince was lying at full length on the floor of the dressing-room, apparently well satisfied to be in his old quarters again, which he appeared to recognize.

While the men talked together he looked up occasionally at them and blinked his yellow eyes. Once he uttered a low sound that sounded very much like a suppressed growl, and rising, crossed to the door of the room, where he remained for a moment with his nose close to the sill; but he soon returned to his former position.

"Now, I wonder why he did that?" said the circus-man, noticing the act.

"Doubtless he caught the scent of some person whom he does not particularly like," replied Nick. "All animals are strange in their likes and dislikes. They never forget, either. Some person who has offended Prince at one time or another happened to pass the door at that moment, and Prince scented him. That's all."

But if the detective had but known who was at the door at that particular moment, he might have altered the entire program for the evening.

Had he known that it was the woman who called herself Maritza, and that when the tiger crossed the floor to the door she was on her knees outside it, with one ear pressed against the sill, in order that she might hear what was being said inside the room, he would have had cause for uneasiness.

But neither of the men realized this important fact; neither could have guessed it, although in the light of what afterward appeared, Hindpaugh should have guessed something of the kind.

The talk between them slacked down while Nick was dressing; but presently the detective asked:

"Have you received any new information about Millie since I talked with you this afternoon, Hindpaugh?"

"No; nothing new."

"But your promise for to-morrow holds good, does it not?"

"Sure thing."

"Do you really think you can help me?"

"I have not a doubt of it."

"Will you tell me how? There is time for us to talk now."

"To-morrow I will tell you."

"Why so mysterious?"

"Oh, it is part of the game."

"Well, at least this is a good opportunity for making the engagement for to-morrow. What time shall I see you?"

"At any time you please."

"At ten in the morning, then?"

"Yes."

"Hindpaugh, I have an idea that you know right now where Millie Slade can be found, and that you are keeping it from me because you fear that if you told me it might interfere with the performance I have agreed upon for to-night."

"Have it so if you like."

"Is it so, Hindpaugh?"

"Perhaps. I will not say—now."

"Who is this woman Maritza?"

"I have already told you that. She comes to me highly recommended."

"Was she formerly a friend of Millie's?"

"I think so."

"And one who is likely to take up Millie's quarrels?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I had not thought of that, Carter."

The circus-man displayed some uneasiness as he made that reply, and Nick noticed it.

"Perhaps it would be in keeping with the part she plays to direct one of her bullets toward me—as if by accident, you know," he suggested, with a smile. "It would be a thing easily done, you know. She could shoot me, right there, before the eyes of the entire audience, and make it appear as if it were an accident; don't you think so?"

"No, I don't. She wouldn't dare do such a thing. I say, Carter, excuse me, will you? I have just now thought of something I should attend to. I had plumb forgotten it."

He was out of the door and gone before Nick could offer a word of objection, had he seen fit to do so; but the detective had no such idea at all, and he only smiled when the door closed behind the retreating form of the circus-man.

But Hindpaugh went straight to the door of the dressing-room that had formerly been Millie Slade's, and, after rapping upon it, entered and closed it after him.

It was Madam Maritza who wheeled about to receive him as he entered; a dark, swarthy beauty, who did not in the least resemble Millie Slade, unless the fact that her eyes were also greenish in hue might be said to create a resemblance.

What passed between the two is not particularly known; but persons going past the door at that time could hear voices sometimes raised in protest.

Hindpaugh was inside that room only a few moments when he came forth again, and the expression of his face was greatly troubled when he did so.

But he shrugged his shoulders and went on his way, with a grim smile on his features, even though the expression belied the thoughts that were inside his brain.

As he passed along the corridor, he met Nick Carter, leading Prince toward the arena entrance, and he exclaimed:

"Most time for you to go in, Carter."

"Yes," replied the detective, smiling.

CHAPTER XII.

MILLIE SLADE'S LAST ACT.

A perfect storm of applause greeted the entrance of Nick Carter, with Prince, although there was no one in the audience who was positive as to his identity. But they knew the tiger, and they expected much of him. Little did they realize how much they were actually to receive in that particular act of the show.

The huge, circular cage was arranged in the middle ring, as had always been the case for Dumont; but now the other tigers were partitioned off from Nick, instead of occupying the same cage with Prince, as they had done with Dumont's act.

These other beasts were on either side of the detective when he began to put Prince through his act; and he did it well, for Prince seemed rather to enjoy his return to the applause of a multitude.

He jumped a rope with Nick; he vaulted over the detective's head; he laid down and rolled over at command; he shook hands demurely and with dignity; he waltzed with the detective with his forepaws on his former master's shoulders; and he did a lot of other things, too numerous to describe here.

In the meantime the tigers in the adjoining cages strode up and down, closely against the bars, and growled and roared by turns, sometimes standing with their forefeet against the partitions, for they were aware of the fact that it was not their old trainer in the middle cage. They would have made short work of the detective if they could have reached him.

Then, in the midst of the act there was a second burst of applause, and Nick Carter saw out of the corner of his eye, the entrance of Maritza upon the scene.

She came dashing into the arena on the bare back of one of the Arabian horses that Millie had trained and ridden, and the instant Nick saw the woman he recalled again to himself, and if you had been noticing him particularly at that moment you would have seen his right hand move to a spot on his breast that was directly over his heart.

It rested there for an instant, then dropped to his side again; but the smile still held its place on his features.

With a word he quieted Prince, who had uttered a low growl at this entrance; and then, as the audience seemed now more interested in the woman rider than in the tiger, he stood, idly looking on at the scene that "Maritza" was enacting.

She circled the ring many times on her horse; then a second horse was turned loose and she performed with both of them, leaping from one to the other as they ran round and round the sawdust circle.

A supernumerary came forward and tossed a pistol into the hand of Maritza, who caught it as dexterously as Millie Slade could have done.

Then the super took his stand near the center of the ring, and one after another tossed glass balls into the air in front of the running horses; and as he tossed them high above her head, Maritza fired at them with her pistols while the horses she rode—still leaping from one to the other and back again—were running at full speed around the ring.

Not once did the woman miss a shot.

She seemed to be in every respect quite as skilful as Millie Slade had ever been, and Nick Carter, with Prince at his side, watched every move she made.

So did the audience.

The people had forgotten for the moment, the tiger and its new master, in the wonderful performances of this woman.

Murmurs went up asking where Hindpaugh had succeeded in finding another who was quite as expert a shot as his former wonder had been.

As she rode around and around the ring, firing at the glass balls, it would have been noticeable to the people in the audience, had they watched him, that Nick Carter turned with her so that there was never an instant when he did not follow her with his eyes; but their entire attention was riveted upon her, and they did not notice.

But it was evident that the woman did so.

At least, it was evident to Nick Carter.

He saw her frown, once when her glance was for an instant directed toward him; but he only smiled at the frown.

Nick Carter was taking great chances at that moment, and he knew it.

He had suspected all along that Maritza was no other than Millie Slade, returned to her own under an assumed name; and he believed that Hindpaugh knew it, too; that Hindpaugh had dared to let her ride and shoot for him for this one night, in the interests of his show, and for the sake of the wonderful advertising the fact would afterward give him.

Once, over near the dressing-room door, the detective had espied the face of Hindpaugh watching. It was

pale and haggard, and doubtless at that moment he would have given half he possessed had he not permitted his circus zeal to have brought about this moment, fraught as it was with such dire possibilities.

But would Millie dare to attempt the assassination of Nick Carter thus openly?

Why not? She was already guilty of two crimes, and another could make no material difference to her ultimate fate.

Nick Carter believed that she *would* try to shoot him; he had suspected from the first that she would be in the ring with him that night, and he had made his arrangements accordingly.

Among his possessions was a shirt of steel links, which a bullet could not penetrate, and this night he had donned it under his dress. He knew, therefore, that if the woman shot at his heart he would remain unhurt; but if she should aim at his brain, it would be another matter.

That was the chance he took when he went into the cage in the middle ring.

Prince was uneasy, too.

The animal seemed to sense the fact that all was not as it should be.

Twice it reared on its hind legs against the bars of the cage, and growled ominously at the passing woman, who rode her horses so perfectly; but both times Nick pulled the animal back again to the floor of the cage, for he was afraid that Millie might also wreak vengeance upon the unoffending beast.

And she did.

The moment came when she was to perform with two pistols at the same time. It was the very last part of her act, and Nick Carter realized that now, if ever, the crucial moment had arrived.

The pistols were raised, and Nick saw for the fraction of an instant the malevolent gaze of the woman leveled at him, and then at the tiger.

He knew that the instant had arrived.

With a quick motion, he spurned the tiger with his foot, pushing with all his strength, so that Prince leaped away from the detective's foot; and as he did so both pistols were discharged at the same instant.

Nick felt the spatter of one of the bullets against the steel shirt he wore. He felt the thud of it and the impact; but instantly his attention was diverted from himself.

The tiger shivered, and uttered a roar of pain.

Then it leaped forward, every hair bristling with rage, and it hurled itself with all its great strength directly against the bars of the cage.

They were not intended to resist any such onslaught as that one was, and they gave; and a second furious blow with one of the tiger's fore-paws dislodged two of them so that they fell outward into the ring.

With a roar of victory, the tiger sprang forward then, before the detective could do aught to interfere with the animal, even had such a thing been possible.

It bounded into the ring, and crouched there for an instant, and then, with another roar, it leaped into the air, just as the horse that was now bearing the woman on its back, was passing.

But Nick had not been idle.

He, too, darted forward, and sprang through the opening between the bars, at almost the same instant when the tiger did so; and while the now furious animal crouched for its spring, he ran past it, heading off the horse and rider, and succeeded in hurling himself forward, and in making a mad leap into the air, which carried him exactly where he wished to go.

He alighted on the back of the onrushing horse at the same instant with the tiger; and he did so, facing the animal, and Millie Slade, now sensible of her own danger, sprang from the horse's back to the sawdust ring.

The tiger, even with its paw raised to strike, with its jaws distended to crush, controlled itself; for it saw on the instant that its master had taken the place of the woman it had sought to kill.

The paw fell harmlessly, short of Nick Carter; the wide jaws snapped shut, with nothing between them, and Prince, with another wild leap, reached the ground and in an instant was again inside the cage, crouching there, evidently ashamed of what it had done, but lapping its side with its tongue, where the bullet had done no more than inflict a smarting scratch.

The horses that Millie had ridden were, of course, frightened by the sudden appearance of the tiger, and dashed for the dressing-room door; but as the one Nick had leaped upon cleared the barrier, the detective sprang from it—and then, while the audience yelled itself hoarse with approval of what had been done, while men rushed forward to close the opening in the cage, Nick Carter bent above the prostrate form of the bareback-rider.

There was no need to look a second time.

Millie Slade had ridden in her last act.

Her heart, paralyzed by fright when the tiger leaped toward her, had merely stopped. That was all; but it was enough. Millie Slade was dead when they went to her, and it was the awful fright of the moment that had resulted in her death.

No need for the handcuffs now; no need for the vengeance of the law upon that erring woman. She had paid the penalty of what she had done, with her life—and she had brought the tragedy upon herself.

That is all of the story, save to say that if you care to visit Bronx Park, if you will go to the zoo and ask one of the keepers about it, he will, if he is kind and likes your appearance, point out Prince to you; and, perhaps, if you are the right sort of person, he will let you stroke the animal's glossy coat, and you will hear Prince purr contentedly while you do so; and if you should be there of a Sunday afternoon when Nick Carter is in town, you are likely to see him there, too.

THE END.

The next number (696) will contain "The Haunted Circus; or, Nick Carter Lays a Ghost."

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DETECTING A CRIME.

By MARO O. ROLFE.

"Major Hellings is a gentleman, and I will not listen longer to anything you may choose to say to the contrary."

The blue eyes, usually dancing with mischief and merriment, flashed an angry glance at Walter Sterling, and Sadie Rutherven turned away as if to enter the house.

"Stay, Sadie!" pleaded Walter. "Major Hellings is a bad man, and I doubt very much whether he is entitled to the rank he assumes. At least, allow me to prove to you the truth of what I have said. I do not ask for your love again. You have imagined that dashing, handsome villain more worthy of its possession than I. I don't want him, though, to wrong you!"

"Major Hellings is a gentleman, and is entitled to the rank he lays claim to, and his crippled limb would be sufficient proof of the same to one not blinded by prejudice and envy. Good afternoon, Mr. Sterling."

They parted thus. It was their first quarrel. For nearly a year they had been betrothed, and had not Major Hellings come between them, with his dashing ways and bad handsome face they would have lived happily on in the old groove.

He came from the city, and was supposed to be wealthy; but whether or not such was really the case could only be seen by the lavish way in which he expended his money, of which he evidently had an unfailing supply. He was witty and accomplished, and, with his halting step and pallid, almost melancholy, face, he was the very man, above all others, to interest a romantic little damsel like our heroine; and Sadie had passed but a little time in his society before, almost unconsciously to herself, she began to draw mental contrasts between him and Walter Sterling, her betrothed and true-hearted, though less elegant, lover, not particularly complimentary to the latter.

One night, as Sadie stood by the old gate at the rear of the garden, she heard the sound of footsteps, and a minute later Major Hellings stood beside her, his arm encircling her waist and his manly head bowed as he imprinted a passionate kiss on her lips. He took her soft little hand, and as it nestled trustingly in his own, slipped a slender circlet of gold on her finger.

The curious, costly ornament was this betrothal-ring of Major Hellings. It was a magnificent diamond.

Sadie took it from her finger and held it where the subdued light of the rising moon fell upon the sparkling jewel, and on the inner surface of the golden band she saw a curious monogram, formed of the letters M. and W. "My mother's initials," the major said carelessly.

"How beautiful!" Sadie exclaimed enthusiastically.

"The toy is very pretty, darling," was the soft rejoinder. "Business of the most vital importance renders it necessary that I should go to the city to-morrow, to be absent a month, at least. Have you not some token, some keepsake, that I may have to cherish for your own dear sake when I am away?"

A little locket containing her portrait was suspended from her neck by a slender, elegantly wrought golden chain. She unclasped it and placed it in his hand. He kissed her again and went away, triumphing in his wicked heart over his easily achieved conquest. He would write to her while he was away, and one day a letter was placed in her hand. Her heart beat faster for a moment; but one glance at the large, coarse envelope and straggling, almost illegible chirography told her that it could not be from Major Hellings. It was very brief, and written in the same irregular style as the superscription. Sadie deciphered it after a few minutes' study:

"DEAR NIECE: My house was entered last night by a burglar, who shot me through the shoulder, and I am suffering greatly from the wound. Come to me immediately, if you can, for I am all alone, with the exception of a young girl who helps me about my housework.

"Your affectionate aunt,

"ARATHUSA ADAMS."

Thus it was that the letter read, and in obedience to the request it conveyed, Sadie found herself seated in a railway-carriage the following morning, going as rapidly as steam could carry her to her Aunt Arathusa, whom she had not seen since she was a child.

The cars were crowded, and Sadie had to share her seat with a portly, plainly dressed man of middle age, whose jolly face and twinkling gray eyes bespoke a joyful, good-natured temperament. He accosted her with a good-humored smile, and they chatted a while, as passengers will, of the weather, the magazines and kindred topics, until he drew a newspaper from his pocket and became so entirely engrossed in the printed sheet as to be utterly oblivious of things passing around him.

The hot atmosphere of the densely crowded car became so oppressive that Sadie tried to raise the window. It was immovable, and she turned toward her traveling companion; but he read on, without heeding her unspoken appeal, and disliking to disturb him, she soon afterward again attempted the task unaided. Sadie succeeded at last, but the spring was broken, and the heavy frame fell with crushing force on the fingers of her left hand, and she gave utterance to a stifled cry that awakened the jolly-faced traveler from a deep slumber, into which he had been lulled by the sultry air and the easy, monotonous motion of the train.

"Pardon me," he said. "I rode all last night; but you have met with an accident. Are you much hurt?"

"My hand is bruised," she replied, and her pale face showed how great was the pain she suffered.

She drew off her glove, and as she did so something fell from it, jingling down on the floor at her feet. It was Major Hellings' betrothal-ring. Sadie's new friend picked it up in two pieces. It had been broken by the falling window, and its deep, cruel imprint was plainly visible on its wearer's finger. An old lady at the other side of the car volunteered to bind up Sadie's hand in her handkerchief.

While this was being done, the man, now wide-awake, was staring at the broken ring in an amazed sort of way, his twinkling little gray eyes glistening with a shrewd triumph.

"Found!" he whispered almost below his breath. "Found, after two months' diligent search. I cannot be mistaken. It is Marion Wayne's ring. But how came it in the possession

of this young lady? That is a secret I have yet to discover."

Thanking the old lady for her kindness, Sadie turned toward the stranger and met his keen eyes fixed on her face, as if he meant to read her very thoughts. It was not a common stare of curiosity or impudence, but a sharp, searching look, which was withdrawn in an instant, and the man said cheerily:

"You look pale. Do you feel better?"

"Much better now, but—oh, I have lost my ring!"

"Here it is, but it is broken," he said as he dropped it in her little hand, eagerly outstretched to receive it. "It is curiously wrought, and, I should judge, very valuable. I have never seen but one like it. Where did you get it, if you do not think me impertinent?"

"It is a present from a very dear friend."

"From a very dear friend?" he said, repeating her words after her.

"Yes," she replied. "Is there anything very strange in that?"

Paying no heed to her question, he went on:

"Will you tell me the name of the friend who gave you that ring? Your brother, perhaps?"

"No; it was not my brother. I have no brother. I do not see how it can concern you, and I decline to answer."

"You decline to answer?" again repeating her words.

"Yes, sir," she replied, with a little more spirit than was necessary, as she put the broken ring safely away in her portemonnaie.

"I hope you will pardon me. Perhaps I was intrusive."

The inquisitive stranger relapsed into silence and was soon apparently as far gone into dreamland as before. But he was not sleeping. His busy mind was reviewing all the revolting details of a crime that had been committed in a distant city—the city to which he was now going—two months before. Since then this man, keen of scent and untiring as a sleuth-hound, had been searching far and wide for the perpetrator of that crime, and now he thought he had discovered a clue.

Sadie arrived at her destination late in the afternoon, and found her Aunt Arathusa looking very wan and tired as she lay back among the pillows, with her wounded shoulder neatly bandaged in soft white cloths. She told her that she had been awakened on the night of the burglary by sounds as of some one stepping stealthily about in the next room.

She was not a timid woman, and although alone in the house, save for the girl she had mentioned in her letter to Sadie, she arose and opened the door communicating with the adjoining apartment. The burglar was in the act of opening a casket in which she always kept all papers of value, and what money she might chance to have on hand, and was interrupted by the sharp click of the door-latch. Turning suddenly he saw her, and taking quick aim, fired at her, a pistol-ball piercing her shoulder as she ran across the room and leaped through an open window. She reeled and fell, and the man made his escape.

The girl was aroused by the report, and coming to her assistance, found Miss Adams in a dead faint on the floor. When asked to describe the man, she said that he was lame and wore dark clothes. She did not think she would know his face if she saw it again. Her attorney, Mr. Bissinger, had telegraphed to New York for a noted detective named Grabb McNabb, who was expected that night. The lawyer came that evening, bringing the man-hunter with him; and great was Sadie's astonishment when McNabb was presented to her at recognizing the man who had shared her seat that afternoon in the crowded railway-carriage.

"Pardon," said he, when the salutations were over, "you refused to tell me who gave you your diamond ring. Will you tell me now to whom you gave this?"

As the detective spoke he drew a small gold locket from his pocket and placed it in Sadie's hand.

It was the same she had given Major Hellings that night, a month before, out by the garden gate. She flushed hotly as she said:

"To Major Hellings, my betrothed husband; but how did it come in your possession?"

"It was found outside under the window," replied McNabb, "where Major Hellings, or Dick Whinyard—for that is his real name—dropped it as he escaped from the house after shooting your aunt. Did he give you the ring?"

"Yes," faltered Sadie, too much frightened to say more.

"Yes, Major Hellings gave it to me."

"I hope you don't care much for him," said the lawyer; "for he is a villain of the worst character."

"But I do care for him! I care a great deal for him!" said Sadie hesitatingly. "I have promised to become his wife. Surely there is some dreadful mistake."

"There is no Major Hellings," repeated the detective. "There is Dick Whinyard, and Dick Whinyard is a villain, and has got a wife already! I will tell you where he got that ring. He stole it from the finger of a dead woman as she lay in her coffin the night before her burial!"

Sadie recoiled in horror, and would have spoken had not McNabb checked her with a wave of the hand as he went on with his ghastly story:

"Horace Wayne is a wealthy merchant of this city. All will remember, also, that the house of the bereaved merchant was entered and robbed of plate and articles of jewelry to the amount of several thousand dollars on the night before the funeral of the dead heiress. Not content with pillaging the house, the robber, in his fiendish lust for gold, took that ring from the hand of the corpse. But he did not escape unseen. Walter Sterling, a cousin of the dead girl, aroused from his sleep by a noise made by the burglar, entered the room just in time to put a pistol-ball through the ruffian's leg as he disappeared through the door. He was assisted away by accomplices, and has ever since walked with a peculiar, hobbling gait. For two months I have been constantly searching for him, but in vain until to-night, when I discovered him in this place, the scene of his crime, and caused his arrest. He is now in the city prison, and having made a confession, I doubt if he sees the outside of stone walls for fifteen years."

"Is it true?" asked Sadie when he had finished. "Is it all true, or have I been dreaming?"

"Only too true," said the lawyer sympathetically.

"Then here is Marion Wayne's ring," she said calmly. "I never want to see it again!"

She laid the broken trinket on the table, close by Grabb McNabb's hand, and without another word left the room.

It was a still, beautiful summer evening, and there was not a sound save the rustling of the green leaves overhead, and Sadie's hysterical little sobs as she crouched down by the great, gnarled apple-tree out by the garden gate, weeping bitterly.

"He told me so; but I wouldn't heed his warning. He said that dashing, handsome man, with his serpent tongue and fascinating ways, was a villain; but I scorned his love and despised his warning. Oh, Walter!"

There was a quick eager step behind her.

"Sadie!"

"Oh, Walter!"

"Sadie, my own darling once more!"

"Yes, Walter," she said softly; "yours, if you will take me back again."

One day there came to the prison a wan-looking little woman, with hollow cheeks and great, sorrowful, black eyes, wishing to see Dick Whinyard, who had been sentenced to solitary confinement for ten years.

"I am his wife," she said, and they let her pass.

An hour, two, three hours passed, and she did not come out. Entering the convict's cell, they found them both dead!

An empty phial, labeled "poison," told the rest.

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